



INTERGALACTIC
FAIRY TALES
WONDERLAND



ROBERT MCKAY

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WONDERLAND

(Intergalactic Fairy Tales)

Robert McKay

For my wonderful wife, Faith.
My life wouldn't be possible without you.

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CHAPTER ONE

“Arrr! Avast you scurvy dogs.” Alice jumped from the forecastle to the main deck, though they resembled a chair and tile floor. “First Mate, Dinah, be that a vessel ripe for plunder off the port bow?”

It wasn’t much of a vessel from what Alice could see. It sat fairly high in the water, so there was probably little in the way of cargo, but there was only one visible crewman. The man on board appeared unaware of their ship being within striking distance, ready to take him down. He was reading on a small electronic device, hardly appropriate for sea travel, and bore a striking resemblance to her father, but Alice wouldn’t be deterred.

“Mew,” replied Dinah, before returning to grooming her paw.

Alice heard an excited, “Aye, Cap’n!”

“Then what are you lot standing about for? I want to be painting a new name on that ship’s arse and counting my plunder before sundown. Bring us about!” She waved her sword in the air and pointed it toward the ship.

“Language, Alice,” said the crewman of the soon to be plundered ship, but he was too far away to be heard properly over the roar of the ocean.

After a bit of furniture rearranging, Alice’s ship was brought up alongside the other vessel. “Prepare to board,” called Alice. “If you lot want to eat tonight, make damn sure you don’t set this thing ablaze.”

“Mew,” said Dinah from her seat upon the forecastle chair.

“Excellent, First Mate, Dinah. I’m glad to hear that you want to lead the raiding party!” Alice hefted the black tabby cat into her arms, a mischievous grin on her face. “I can see you’re ready by your determined look. Then off you go!”

The black tabby landed on the end of the couch a couple of feet away with a soft plop, where she looked around in confusion and then tore off at high speed toward Alice’s father. When she hit his lap, she seemed even more confused and bolted out into the open sea. Unfortunately, she took her father’s reading tablet with her.

“Agh!” shouted her father, inspecting his thighs for claw marks.

“Alice,” hissed her mother from the kitchen doorway. “What in the world are you doing?”

Her mother entering straight from the open sea ruined the fantasy. Alice sighed in defeat. “I was just about to commandeer this vessel and rename it, making it mine by pirate law, and force it to join my armada of ships.”

Alice’s father was watching with a slight smile, which died the instant her mother turned her glare on him.

“You are thirteen years old, Alice. You are entirely too old to be playing silly games like this on the living room furniture.” Her mother shooed her off her forecastle chair so that she could put it back in its proper place.

“Right, James?”

“Right,” said Alice’s father, sitting up straight in his seat and putting on his stern face. “Pickle, you’re getting older now, it’s time to put away childish games like playing pirate.”

“And no more silly nicknames either,” said her mother, stepping over and taking the stick Alice had been using as her sword. She threw it casually into the lit fireplace. Alice watched it burn forlornly.

“Right, you’ll be an adult soon enough, P—Alice. It’s time to learn how to behave like one.”

Alice scowled at them both. She loved her pirate books like nothing else she owned. They were dog-eared and the bindings were falling apart from the number of times she’d read them. There was nothing in the world she could imagine she wanted to be more than a pirate. It was complete freedom to do what you pleased and take what you wanted from wealthy merchants who would never miss a couple of ships a year. Adventure and danger lurked around every corner. She could never be a teacher like her father, or a doctor like her mother. Not nearly enough excitement. “It’s not a childish game,” she retorted. “I’m practicing for the life I plan to live. I refuse to be just like my parents the way the two of you are like Grandma and Grandpa.”

“You don’t have to be just like us,” responded her mother, sitting on the couch next to her father. “You don’t even have to decide right now. You just have to stop jumping around on the furniture and learn to act like a proper young lady.”

They’d had this conversation before. As reasonable as her mother sounded, she didn’t really care what Alice wanted for herself. She would have a choice of proper professions like scientists, doctor, lawyer, or teacher

and she would be groomed to fit in one of those roles, regardless of what she truly wanted. Her cousin Vincent had declared that he didn't want to be the corporate type after receiving his degree in philosophy. He went out and bought a tiny house in the country and planted a massive vegetable garden and started calling himself a plant wizard. It was the family scandal.

Vincent's parents had come over to see Alice's parents one evening to discuss how they could stop their son from leading the life of a dirt-poor farmer. They concocted a plan that involved taking him out for dinner at a fancy restaurant and introducing him to a proper young lady they knew. She was studying business and planned to be a marketing executive.

Alice was dragged along to the stuffy restaurant and sat next to her cousin. He talked the whole time about his meal, marveling at how amazing it was that you could put little seeds in the ground and a few months later, food popped out. He said it was the most amazing magic he could imagine, and Alice finally understood why he called himself a plant wizard. While it was a life she would never choose for herself, she could see why he had chosen it. Apparently, the proper young lady could too, because she ended up leaving school to move out to the country with him.

"I've already made my decision, Mother," said Alice, putting on her most polite smile, the one just like her mother used when she was around company.

"Oh?" said her mother, a hopeful twinkle in her eye. Secretly, Alice knew, she wanted her to be a doctor like she was, though she never said as much out loud. She wanted to give Alice the illusion of no expectations.

"Yes," said Alice, folding her hands primly in front of her and willing her blue eyes to project seriousness. "I've put a lot of thought into it, and without any doubt, I can tell you that I want to be a pirate."

Her mother's jaw dropped and then clamped shut with an audible clack. "More games!" she fumed. Her father coughed, though it sounded suspiciously like a laugh, which earned him a wicked glare from her mother. "Up to your room young lady. You can go to bed without dinner tonight. And if I hear you up there tumbling around, you won't be going to your friend Anna's house this weekend."

"Father?" pleaded Alice, knowing that he'd gotten her out of situations like this many times in the past.

He looked over to her mother, words of bargaining on his lips, but they died when he met her withering glare. "Do as your mother says, Pickle."

“James...”

“Sorry, Laura. Do as your mother says, Alice.”

Alice’s lip began to tremble and her eyes welled up with tears. She wanted to stay and argue further, but she wasn’t about to cry in front of anyone. That’s not something a pirate would ever do. If she had to cry, it would be in the privacy of her own cabin so that her crew would keep a healthy fear and respect for her. She stomped off as loudly as she could and ran up the stairs to her room and slammed the door shut behind her.

She continued to stomp around her room with no real intention, other than being loud. She wanted her mother to enact the ban on going to Anna’s house. It hadn’t been much fun going over there the last several months. All Anna wanted to talk about were which boys she thought liked her by the way they pulled her hair and said mean things.

The boys had started to pay more attention to Alice this year in school. She found it incredibly annoying. A well placed punch in Tommy’s mouth had taken care of that. Since that incident, the boys had little interest in Alice, and Anna had become completely insufferable under their added attention.

Dinah mewed her displeasure at all the noise. Alice scooped her up in her arms and flopped down heavily on the bed to make her displeasure known to her parents. “Sorry about that Dinah. You’ll get your plunder next time.”

The cat nuzzled her chin and licked her once with her rough tongue. Alice jerked her head back. “Augh. You know I hate that, Dinah.”

Dinah looked up at her innocently and Alice dissolved into giggles. “And that’s exactly why you did it, you little monster. You’d make a perfect first mate and I’ll definitely take you when I get my ship.”

The cat simply stared at her with her luminescent yellow eyes. Alice took that as a solemn vow to join her, despite the fact that she would likely get her paws wet and she hated that.

Alice lay back on her bed. Dinah curled up beside her and immediately went to sleep. “That’s right girl, rest up. Big day of pirating ahead tomorrow. Who cares what our parents say.”

Alice looked over her room, her eyes growing heavy. She stared longingly at the model ships and ocean paintings on her wall. She had read her first pirate adventure when she was eight years old. Throughout the intervening years, her room had gradually transformed from a princess’ palace to a scoundrel’s hideout. Her parents had encouraged her at that age,

confident she would outgrow the phase like she had with her princess obsession. Her father was still a soft touch, buying her the blunted sword that hung above her bed just a few weeks ago, but her mother had long since stopped encouraging her.

She looked down at her blue dress and sighed. She knew she should get up and change into pajamas, but she suddenly couldn't find the strength. The dress was her favorite and it always made her happy when she wore it, so her mother had tried to use it as a way to discourage her from being a pirate.

"Pirates don't wear dresses," she'd said. "They have to wear ugly brown pants that get torn and dirty."

"Pirates don't follow any rules, Mother," Alice had said, as if she were explaining to a child. "That's the glory of being a pirate, you can do whatever you want. And if I want to wear a dress, then I can do as I please."

Her mother hadn't liked that response very much, but she didn't have a good argument to counter it. So, Alice went on wearing her dresses and practicing her nautical cursing, while daydreaming about what her ship would be like, despite the fact that there really wasn't much trade on the ocean these days. The ocean held such mystery. Planes and high-tech machines like matter transporters had replaced ships when it came to cargo. She'd read about piracy in space, where things still had to travel on ships, but spaceships these days were mostly used for the Colarian war.

Once she stopped focusing on her room and began to imagine the life of a space pirate, it wasn't long before she drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

Alice woke slowly, her eyes barely able to focus in the gloom. Dinah still lay curled up beside her. The only light to be had in her room was from the moon shining in through her bedroom window. She got up and walked over to peer outside into the field behind her house, as she often did when she woke from bad dreams. She couldn't recall her dreams this time, but going back to sleep felt impossible. Thoughts of her life spent in boredom as an accountant, handling other people's stacks of plundered money instead of getting her own, haunted her.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts and focused on the nighttime activities in the field. There were small animals scurrying about under the watchful eye of an owl that occasionally took flight and swooshed down in an attempt to snatch up a meal. As most things did, it reminded her of the pirate life and made her heart ache.

Then, without warning, something white and massive swooped down from the sky. The owl screeched and flew away, wanting nothing to do with the new arrival. It was so far away that Alice had a hard time guessing its size. It prowled along the edge of the forest on the opposite side of the field, dancing in and out of the shadows. It didn't move like any bird she'd ever seen before, gliding without the need to pump its wings, if it had them. When it disappeared behind a stand of trees, Alice made her decision. She was going to follow it.

She held her breath and listened. Her parents were laughing downstairs. There was nothing keeping her in her room other than a window that opened to an easily climbable tree. Fear gripped her heart. She'd never been out in the woods at night by herself.

Dinah looked up at her and yawned. "Mreoooow?"

"Yeah, what am I waiting for?" asked Alice. "This is all just a dream anyway. There aren't any creatures like what I just saw, so I might as well go check it out."

Dinah laid her head back down and closed her eyes, satisfied that she'd done her job.

Alice slid open the window and eyed the closest branch. The full moon lit it well and she'd climbed on it so often that it may as well have been a paved road to the ground. Normally she wouldn't dream of so openly defying her parents, but tonight she'd had enough. Pirates did as they wished and made no apologies. She swung a leg over the sill and placed it carefully on the tree branch.

Something nagged at the back of her mind, something she was forgetting. Scanning her room, her eyes locked on the blunted sword above her bed, illuminated in a stray beam of moonlight. One couldn't have a proper pirate adventure without a sword. Even if it didn't have a sharp edge, she could still do some serious harm with it.

Moments later Alice was down the tree and running across the open field, her sword tucked into a white sash she'd belted around her waist. It bounced reassuringly at her side as she barreled after the large creature as fast as her feet would carry her. The moonlight gave her plenty of light to run by, even if she hadn't known the field like the back of her hand. A heady mix of elation tinged with fear suffused her limbs, urging her forward.

As quickly as the beast had been traveling, Alice expected to have to run for quite a lot longer once she reached the forest. Instead, it sat, or rather hovered, in the same spot she saw it disappear. She had to pull up short to avoid running into it.

The creature was the strangest thing she'd ever seen. While it was obviously alive, since it was clearly looking at her with two large round eyes, it also very much resembled a ship. A good sized white ship, with what appeared to be floppy ears. On the whole, it looked like a spaceship had mated with an enormous white rabbit and this creature was its offspring.

"Hello," said Alice, unsure of what else to say.

The creature didn't seem to have a mouth, but that didn't keep it from responding, if rather rudely. "You're trampling my mushrooms."

"Oh," said Alice, looking down at her feet and finding that she was indeed standing on a few of the dozens of mushrooms spread around her. "I'm sorry, I didn't notice them."

"No matter, they work just as well all broken up," said the creature.
"Stand aside so I can collect them."

"No," said Alice, scowling up at the creature. "This field belongs to my parents, so these mushrooms belong to them as well. You're trespassing and stealing."

"Oh, dear heavens, how shall I ever live with myself?" retorted the creature and then rolled its eyes. It was quite an impressive feat, considering its eyes were almost twice her height.

"And now you're mocking me," said Alice, stomping a couple more mushrooms in spite.

"I don't have time for this," said the creature. "I'm going to be late. Absolem haggles for so long that I'm probably already going to be missed."

"Well, if perhaps you were a bit nicer, I might consider letting you have the mushrooms," said Alice.

"And if I try to take them without being nice?"

Alice drew her sword from her sash and pointed it at the creature's massive eye. Strangely there wasn't as much of a reflection as she expected to see. There was a large open space behind the glass of its eye. "Then you shall taste my blade," said Alice as dramatically as she could.

"That blade is clearly blunted," scoffed the creature. "Besides, you're just a tiny little girl and I'm—oh bugger this, I don't have the time."

"What are you, anyway?" asked Alice, lowering her sword, not because it was too heavy to hold up any longer, because she decided she liked this strange and ornery creature. Her aching arm was relieved anyway.

"I'm late, that's what I am. The queen will have my head if I'm not back soon," muttered the ship-creature. "I've got to get my mushrooms and go."

Suddenly dozens of tiny tendrils sprouted from either side of the creature's head and began to pluck the mushrooms and pull them back. Alice shrunk from the strange display. Each of the light pink tendrils was roughly the width of a fingertip. They wrapped carefully around the stems of the mushrooms like pink snakes. Then they constricted and pinched them off and took them away toward the ship-creature's neck. Alice followed them and found they were being pulled inside an open hatch on either side. With them open she could see entirely through the bizarre creature. If she hadn't been talking to it, she would have assumed it was some sort of vehicle. A hovercraft, since it clearly floated about a half meter off the ground.

The mushrooms were stored in compartments just inside the creature, toward its rear. They opened very much like a normal drawer or cabinet would, sliding or pulling out. Everything inside was the same light pink as the tendrils. A soft glow emanated from recesses in the ceiling, giving her a decent view down the length of the creature's insides. "Wow," commented Alice, unable to find a better word.

"Stay away from there," said the creature, pausing in its mushroom collection.

"You surely are an amazing beast," said Alice, reaching out to touch its white exterior. It was as hard as steel, but warm to the touch.

"Hmph," it said in response, and went back to its mushroom collection.

Alice tucked her sword back inside her sash, carefully raised her foot, and stepped up on the edge of the creature's open hatch. The floor was slightly spongy in texture, but plenty solid enough for walking on. Before she could convince herself it was a bad idea, Alice walked toward the rear of the craft, which it clearly was now that she could see inside it. She brushed past the tendrils going about their job of stuffing mushrooms into cabinets and drawers and found there were large crates and bags stacked inside, bursting with other goods. "What is all this stuff for?" asked Alice.

"None of your business," replied the creature. Its tendrils deposited their mushrooms and then slowly retreated into tiny holes in the ceiling and walls. Flaps closed over them like eyelids. "Now get out of there, I have business that I'm late for. Out with you."

"And if I don't?" asked Alice, climbing a ladder made of the same white metal material as the creature's hull.

"Well, then I shall be forced to pull you out and drop you on your ear."

"You'll have to catch me first," called Alice, hurrying quickly up the ladder and further toward the rear of the ship. The tendrils were back out and floating toward her. One tickled her side and she let out a giggle. It wasn't very pirate-like, but she figured it was her intentions that truly mattered, and she intended to take this ship.

"Hey now," called the creature. "That's not fair, I can't reach back that far, and—oh, stop that, it tickles!"

The tendrils danced and waved in front of Alice's face, obviously stretched to their limits. She poked at them playfully, eliciting further laughter from the ship. "No, I don't think I'm going to leave. I think I shall make you my ship," replied Alice.

“I can’t be your ship,” replied the creature, suddenly sounding sulky.

“Well, you don’t seem to be able to stop me from staying aboard, so I think that makes you mine,” said Alice.

“Oh, bugger this, I don’t have time to deal with you. If you continue to tickle me, know that I can jettison you into space any time that I please,” grumped the ship.

“Space?” asked Alice, a bit of trepidation obvious in her voice’s slight quaver.

“Of course, silly girl,” said the creature, closing its side hatches, sealing Alice inside. “I can’t very well be a spaceship if I never go into space, can I?”

“I guess not,” said Alice, wondering if it was wise to go into space while inside the belly of a living creature. Especially one that seemed to be cross with her. She comforted herself with the fact that this whole thing was quite impossible and that she had to be dreaming, so nothing could hurt her.

“Hold onto something, little girl,” said the creature, and then lurched upward with astounding speed. “Breaking atmosphere can be a little rough on those that have never done it before.”

“Who’s to say that I’ve never done it before?” said Alice, grabbing onto the rail that lined the upper walkway. Her stomach dropped into her feet and then threatened to jump up and out of her mouth. When she was confident that she wouldn’t empty the contents of her stomach, she said, “And if we’re going to be traveling together, you should call me by my name.”

The creature didn’t respond. “It’s Alice,” she said finally.

“Nice to meet you, Alice,” said the creature, his tone strangely subdued, as if he were dreading something.

“And what is your name?” asked Alice.

The creature sighed and muttered, “One-zero-three-one-zero-four.”

“What kind of a name is that?” asked Alice, her brow furrowed.

“It’s not really, just something the dock master writes on his chart, so they know that I’m accounted for.”

“Well, what do your friends call you?” asked Alice, the crease between her eyes deepening in disapproval.

“I don’t have any friends,” said the creature, banking hard to the side and then leveling again. The ride suddenly smoothed out. “We’re through the atmosphere now, smooth sailing for a while, so if you want to move about, you can.”

Alice climbed down the ladder and moved slowly toward the front of the ship. She had to think of it as a ship when she was moving around inside, or it made her queasy. Because if it wasn't a ship, then she really was just food inside a large beast's gut. When she reached the front of the ship, her eyes opened as wide as saucers. They truly were in space. A black blanket spread out before them endlessly, dotted with sparkling stars, so many more than she'd ever seen from her own yard, and they were all around. Not just up, but down as well. She was so lost in her reverie that she forgot about their conversation for a few minutes. "You must have friends," said Alice, taking a seat in what was most definitely a chair. It even swiveled. "What about this Absolem you are on the way to meet?"

The ship laughed so heartily that she could feel it shake beneath her feet. "Absolem doesn't have any friends either, only business associates. If he had a friend, he might not screw them out of their last penny, and then he wouldn't have his reputation."

"So, you don't have any friends, or a proper name?" asked Alice, her heart breaking for this strange creature.

"I guess that about sums it up," said the creature, obviously uncomfortable.

"Well, let's change that right now. I'm going to be your friend and I'm going to give you a proper name, like any person or ship should have," said Alice, cupping her chin in her hand. "Which one are you anyway, person or ship?"

"I'm both!" huffed the ship-creature. "Don't be so narrow-minded. It won't serve you well on Wonderland."

"Hmmm," said Alice, rubbing her chin. "I don't have much experience in naming people, so I shall name you like a ship and many of the best ship names come from their appearance, in my opinion. I never understood nonsense like naming your ship The Jolly Roger. That doesn't fit at all."

"No, I don't like that name one bit," said the ship-creature.

Alice thought for a moment about her initial impression of the creature with its large eyes and floppy ears. "I think I shall call you The White Rabbit," said Alice, a smile lighting up her face. "If that's all right with you."

Alice got the impression of a smile in the creature's voice when he responded, "Oh, I do so enjoy watching rabbits scurry and scamper about.

They're so fast and they run through tunnels. I think it's a great name for me indeed."

"Good! I think I'll call you Rabbit for short," said Alice, her smile stretching to ridiculous proportions. Now she had officially commandeered her first ship and given it a new name. She was truly a pirate in the real sense of the word. Forget her parents and all of their nonsense about how she couldn't be a pirate. Too bad it was only a dream.

CHAPTER THREE

Alice leaned forward in her chair, watching the stars slip by, intent on studying every aspect of her first adventure as a real pirate. It was all terribly exciting for the first few hours. She and Rabbit talked about their families and their adventures. Alice did most of the talking, but she didn't mind. Rabbit was a good listener and objected to the right things and laughed in the right places.

After a while though, Alice started to run out of things to talk about and the view didn't change much. She'd read that during calm seas it could get dreadfully dull on the sea, but it never really seemed possible. The life of a pirate was so full of adventure. How could it ever get boring? She decided that it had to be due to the lack of a crew on the ship. Things were bound to get boring if you only ever had one other person to talk to. Maybe she could find a crew on this Wonderland that Rabbit said they were headed to. Then they could start doing some real plundering.

"How long until we get to Wonderland?" asked Alice.

"Not long now," said Rabbit in a speculative tone. "I'm nearly to the place where I can make my Tunnel."

"Tunnel?" asked Alice. "How does one make a tunnel through space? It's nothing but one big empty hole to begin with."

"That's a great question that I'm not nearly smart enough to answer," said Rabbit, a chuckle coloring his words. "I just know how to do it."

"That's mad. How can you do something you don't understand?"

"Well, do you understand how you digest your food and turn it into energy to keep your body moving? Or how your heart beats and pumps blood through your veins?" asked Rabbit, his voice taking on the tenor of one of her school teachers.

"No, not really," answered Alice, seeing the point Rabbit was trying to make. "But that doesn't mean that I can't continue to do them."

"Exactly, my dear, exactly. Now hold on again, the Tunnel can get a bit bumpy sometimes. Wouldn't want you to bang that pretty little blonde head

of yours.”

“I can take care of myself, thank you very much,” said Alice, though she did grip the arms of her chair more firmly. “I’m a pirate on an adventure to a distant world. I don’t need any help.”

Rabbit sniffed impolitely and covered it up with a cough. “All right, here we go.”

In front of the ship appeared a ragged tear in space. An orange glow seeped through the crack, which gradually widened into a round hole just a bit larger than Rabbit himself. The view through the ship’s eyes was amazing. Inside the hole was a swirl of colors twirling through an orange glowing mist. They plunged forward and the mist engulfed them, whipping by at immense speed. It was the most beautiful and terrifying thing that Alice had ever seen. Traveling through space was very different than the Tunnel. Large shapes constantly formed in the mist, looking like solid objects. Every time, Alice would hold her breath and wait for them to be obliterated, and then the ship would pass through them unharmed. Rabbit was heartily enjoying himself, letting out a cheer as they passed through each cloud of insubstantial matter and Alice gripped her seat even harder.

After what seemed like an eternity, they passed through the other end of the Tunnel and into the black of open space again. This time though, there was immediately something else in their view. It was a small circle in a red hue that steadily grew closer and closer. As they approached, Alice could see two smaller white circles around it. Planets. No, not multiple planets. Just one planet being orbited by two small moons. They grew larger and larger and eventually the moons had some color too. One was a light blue and the other a pastel green.

“Is that Wonderland?” asked Alice, barely above a whisper.

“Oh, yes, it really is quite beautiful from up here when you see it for the first time. It’s been so long for me that I can barely remember.” Rabbit’s tone was somber and it felt to Alice that he was moving slower than before.

“You don’t seem happy to be back home,” observed Alice, finally loosening her grip on her seat.

“Not particularly, but what else am I supposed to do?”

“You’re a ship that can travel the whole universe, why not strike off on your own and see where the wind blows you?”

“Oh, don’t think I haven’t tried, dear Alice. She always finds me. If I run off again, I’m certain I’ll lose my head,” said Rabbit, no hint of a joke in his

tone.

"That's just silly, nobody does beheading in this day and age. Nedra hasn't even executed a prisoner in a hundred years. Father says that execution was the most barbaric thing our society ever came up with and that it was never even proved to be an effective deterrent." Alice nodded as if she were rather satisfied with herself and her knowledge of politics.

"Well, you're not on Nedra any more, and the queen of Wonderland doesn't care about whether it's an effective deterrent. She just likes the dull thud a head makes when it hits the ground. I'm sure mine would make a particularly loud one and she would laugh her head off. Not literally of course, she'll never lose her own head. She'll live forever with her collection of hearts."

Now Rabbit was speaking plain nonsense. "I think you may have gone a bit mad, Rabbit," said Alice, shaking her head.

"Oh, I'm certain of it, as has all of Wonderland. If you point out everything that's mad on Wonderland, you'll never do anything else."

Rabbit was silent for a few moments, and Alice didn't know how to respond, so she waited and watched the red planet draw near. It was so different from the pictures of Nedra she'd seen from space in school. She felt a little cheated that she'd gone into space and not even gotten to see her planet before they set off. It was always a blue-green in the pictures in school. The deep crimson of Wonderland seemed so exotic by comparison. And also, a bit intimidating. It reminded her of the velvety coat of one of the terrifying Colarians that had been making war on her planet. Her mother had told her the war would be over soon. Alice still shuddered whenever she remembered the image of that dark red beast charging down the street, its mouth gaping, showing its fangs.

"What is this Absolem fellow like?" asked Alice, trying to break free of the terrible thoughts the red planet had brought up in her mind.

"Oh, he's not a bad sort, really," said Rabbit. "Not a good sort either, though. Pragmatic, I guess is the word. Now hold tight, atmosphere again."

Alice gripped the arms of her chair and watched the planet's surface draw closer and closer. The red color she'd seen from space wasn't a natural phenomenon as the coloring of Nedra was, from its foliage and oceans. On Wonderland, nearly everything glowed with lights, mostly neon, like the open signs in the front of shops on Nedra. Some places, entire buildings were covered in lights. Many of them depicted crude things her mother had

always told her she wasn't old enough to talk about yet, which was ridiculous because they had taught basic sex education two years before in school.

Ever since then, Anna had been obsessed. She invited Alice over and then dragged her up to her room and pulled out a whole pile of dirty magazines she'd found in her older brother's room. Alice had found them both disgusting and intriguing. They were for private time, though, and the images on the screens and in the moving lights were broadcast large enough for the whole planet to see. It was disturbing.

Thankfully, not all of the images were so upsetting. Some of them depicted strange and exotic animals eating leaves. Others showed acrobats performing the most amazing feats Alice had ever seen. If they were willing to show that just in an advertisement, Alice couldn't imagine what the full show would be like. They flew at high speed, each giant screen was only visible for a few seconds, and yet they just kept coming. Wonderland appeared to be one humongous city, sprawling as far as the eye could see and then some. "Where is the countryside?" asked Alice when she was able to close her mouth and wet her tongue again.

"There isn't one," replied Rabbit. "Why do you think I was scavenging mushrooms on your planet?"

"I honestly hadn't given it much thought," she said, her eyes still glued on the city below, expecting to see a break at some point, even if it was just a park with a few trees. On and on it went, until they finally made it to a part that had a few less lights than the rest.

"Well, you may want to start giving things more thought," said Rabbit, banking to the right and downward at a sharp angle. "Not thinking in Wonderland can get you into a lot of trouble."

Alice sighed and rolled her eyes. She'd just left her parents behind, and here was her ship, telling her how to behave. She'd do exactly as she pleased and deal with the consequences herself. She was a strong pirate woman and she didn't need help from anyone.

Rabbit slowed to a crawl and then stopped altogether before dropping to hover just above a large patch of pavement. Small dirty buildings huddled around the open space, as if they were just waiting for an opportunity to move out into it and get some more distance from their neighbors.

The buildings themselves were in various states of disrepair, except for one. It was larger than the others and was in immaculate condition. It even

managed to have a bit of space between it and its neighbors. The space was still paved over, but it was covered with potted plants, some of them full grown trees. The house was light blue with a bright red door. Approaching from the walk that led to the house was a large figure. It was night on this part of Wonderland and it wasn't possible to make out much more than shapes unless they were in direct light. What Alice could see of the shape was large...and *undulating*. It sent a shiver up her spine.

The hatches on either side of Rabbit opened, like they had when he was picking mushrooms. Alice had decided The White Rabbit was a he, though his voice wasn't particularly masculine or feminine. There was just something about his energy that felt like a boy. It was entirely possible that he was neither, being a ship and all, but it felt rude to ask.

The tendrils emerged from their holes and started disgorging the various boxes and bags from the ship's hold. Despite their large quantity, and in some cases, extreme weight, they were removed with impressive speed. In a matter of a couple minutes everything inside the ship was put out on the pavement, including a large pile of mushrooms.

Alice had lost sight of the approaching shape while watching Rabbit unload. She peeked through the left—no, starboard—hatch and found him standing there. He was on about a hundred tiny legs that still didn't seem sufficient to support his dark blue bulk, half of which arched up into the air in an S shape so that he could face them.

"Hello Absolem," said Rabbit, a nervous hitch in his voice.

"You're late," said the creature. His voice was a smooth rumble. It soothed Alice, despite his strange appearance.

"Yes, I had a bit of a complication," said Rabbit, nudging Alice out onto the pavement with a few of his tendrils.

"Oh, what have we here?" asked Absolem, eyeing Alice in a way that no longer left her feeling soothed. He held up a hose with a metal mouth piece on one end and sucked on it. "You would fetch quite a nice price." Each word was punctuated with a ring of smoke as it exited his mouth.

Alice coughed and waved her hand in front of her nose. The smell was heavy and sweet, like pipe smoke. Then she recognized the device the creature was using. It was a hookah. And a second later she realized that the creature was, in fact, a giant blue caterpillar. "This is the strangest dream."

"If this is your idea of a dream, then I'd hate to see your version of a bloody nightmare," said the caterpillar, a soft laugh coloring his words.

“What use could a caterpillar possibly have with all of this stuff?” asked Alice, stepping closer to Absolem, her curiosity getting the better of her.

Slightly behind Absolem, in his considerable shadow, were two average looking men. They stood there as if waiting in line for a particularly fascinating show. Not bored, excited. They didn’t look to Alice like they wanted to make conversation, or like they considered her someone to make conversation with. She decided to ignore them, but rested her hand on her sword just in case.

“I don’t have use for most of it. That’s why I’m probably not going to pay the ship very much,” said Absolem, idly chewing on the mouthpiece of his hookah. “Now you, on the other hand, may be valuable. You surprise me, ship.”

“Wait,” said Alice, stomping her foot. “Are you trying to buy me? I’m not for sale!”

“Everything is for sale,” said the caterpillar, puffing more smoke in Alice’s face. “The only real question is, ‘How much?’”

Alice spluttered and coughed and then turned to Rabbit in disbelief. “Is that why you brought me here? To sell me to some mad blue caterpillar? I bet you only told me to get off in order to make sure I would stay.”

Rabbit laughed rather rudely. “You’ve only been in Wonderland for a few minutes and you’ve already gone mad. That has to be some sort of record.”

Absolem silently puffed on his hookah until they’d finished their exchange and then spoke up again from behind a haze of smoke. “So, like I said, how much do you want for the girl?”

“The girl isn’t for sale. She was just a passenger. You know that I don’t traffic in people, Absolem. Never have and never will,” said Rabbit in a bored tone as if he’d had to repeat himself a hundred times over.

“Well, I’d give you two hundred for her,” said the caterpillar.

“Just give me whatever you’ll give me for the rest of the stuff, and I’ll be on my way.”

“Fine, I’ll put a hundred on your line of credit for the rest of this sorry lot. If you want to deal on the girl, get back to me.”

Alice let loose a scream of pure frustration and pulled her sword, leveling it at the caterpillar’s prodigious underside. She wasn’t entirely sure it would even pierce his chitinous body, but she wanted to be taken seriously. Having a sword pointed at someone tended to get them to take you seriously, or so she’d read.

Apparently it did, because the two goons lurking in Absolem's shadow lurched forward, seeming much larger than average once they were within striking distance. Alice wouldn't be deterred, though. "I'm not for sale. I stole this ship fair and square and gave him a new name, so that makes him mine by pirate law. So if anyone is due any money around here, it's me. Everything on board the ship became mine the moment I commandeered it."

"Ugh," said Rabbit from behind her. "Always the same."

The caterpillar laughed, a full belly laugh that shook his whole body, and waved away his goons. "You are quite the firecracker, little girl. What are you called?"

Alice groaned in frustration. Why was he laughing at her? "I'm called, Give-me-my-money," she retorted.

Alice wasn't sure what she would do with the money, but she was sure that she was tired of being disrespected. She was the owner of The White Rabbit and there was no way she was going to stand being treated this way.

"Well, little Give-me-my-money, I've already paid the ship for these goods, so you'll have to take it up with him the next time you see him."

"What do you mean, 'the next time I...see'?" asked Alice, whirling around so fast that her dress fanned out around her. The White Rabbit was nowhere to be found. "...him?"

"For someone so upset about being sold, you sure didn't think much about how that ship would feel about you saying he was your property." Absolem puffed more smoke in her face.

"I didn't think," started Alice, only to remember the Rabbit's word of advice. "And now, I'm in a whole lot of trouble."

"That does tend to happen here," said the caterpillar sagely. He made a sweeping gesture with a few of his feet, indicating the goods that Rabbit had sold. The goons began to pack it up and lug it back toward the clean house with the plants in front.

"So now what am I supposed to do?" asked Alice.

"There is no 'supposed to' in Wonderland. Only want to," replied Absolem.

"Well, I want to find The White Rabbit, and get back on board so I can build a pirate crew and start plundering," said Alice, sighing heavily. She tucked her sword back in her sash since the caterpillar didn't seem bothered and he had stopped talking about buying her.

“Who is The White Rabbit?”

“The ship!” shouted Alice. “Is that hookah smoke affecting your brain?”

“Oh, how clever, I never really noticed how much he resembled a rabbit until you said that,” offered Absolem, providing exactly no help at all.

“So, how should I go about finding my ship?” asked Alice through gritted teeth. The longer she stood there, the less sense the caterpillar made. Which would normally be just fine, considering he was a caterpillar, but just then, Alice was in desperate need of a little advice and he was the only one around to give it.

“How am I supposed to know what you should do? Only you can know what you should and shouldn’t do,” said Absolem between puffs on his hookah.

Alice felt a familiar burning sensation come to her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. She wasn’t about to cry on her first successful day as a pirate, not even tears of frustration. She took a few deep breaths and tried to rephrase her question in a way that might get her a coherent answer. “Where do you think my ship has run off to?”

“Oh, I should think he’s gone back to the queen’s palace docks. If he’s not there during the count, he’ll be in quite a heap of trouble,” said the caterpillar stroking his chin. “All the better for me. If someone I owe money to loses their head, I’m not obligated to pay them.”

“What is all this nonsense about people losing their heads?”

“Well, now you’re not making any sense. Maybe The White Rabbit was right after all, you have gone mad.”

Alice stomped her feet in frustration and a sob escaped her mouth of its own accord. Once one sob escaped, all of its friends came out to play and soon she was a crying mess. “Maybe I have gone mad. This has to be the longest, maddest dream of my life. When I wake up, maybe I’ll find myself in an asylum.”

“Oh, come now, Alice, things aren’t that bad. You’re at the beating heart of Wonderland’s underworld with its most powerful player feeling sorry for you, and a nice shiny sword at your side. How could this day get any better?” He raised one of his feet up in the air, a gesture of inspiration. “I know just the thing.”

The caterpillar lumbered over to the pile of mushrooms on the ground and plucked one up, and then held it out to Alice. She took it because it was the polite thing to do. “How will this make things better?”

“Oh, if you eat that, you’ll soon feel like you’re ten feet tall,” said the caterpillar, laughing at some private joke that Alice didn’t have the context for.

“Thank you,” said Alice, tucking it into the small pocket on the side of her dress. She already did feel a bit better, just listening to the caterpillar talk his nonsense. His voice really was rather soothing. The mushroom was just a worthless toadstool that her mother had warned her never to eat when she was a small child, but at least she knew where to start looking for her ship.

“Oh, you’re welcome my dear. The first one is always free.” He once again fogged her in a wreath of smoke. She didn’t even cough that time.

“Now, can you point me in the direction of the palace? I’ve got to find my ship.”

“You might want to be careful calling him your ship, Alice. The queen owns everything in Wonderland and claiming possession of her things is a

“Let me guess, a beheading offense,” finished Alice.

“Oh-ho-ho, the girl does learn. Maybe she won’t be killed by tea time after all,” roared Absolem.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” said Alice. “Now, about the palace?”

“Just over that way, my dear,” said the caterpillar, gesturing vaguely off to Alice’s right. “But I really don’t think you ought to go there. Today is the big croquet match. Nothing gets her majesty in a heads-will-roll mood like a game of croquet.”

“Croquet? Really? I do so love a good game of croquet,” said Alice.

“All right, off you go then, I’ve got business to attend to, and you’ve got your funeral to get to. We shouldn’t keep each other from our appointments.”

Alice found herself giggling at the idea of attending her own funeral. Maybe that hookah smoke had gone to her head too. Either way, she was certain that everyone was being silly about the whole beheading thing. Nobody could find joy in chopping off someone else’s head. “You really are the funniest caterpillar I’ve ever had the joy of speaking to,” said Alice by way of a good bye.

“You really are the most peculiar little girl,” said Absolem, waving as she departed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Alice set off down the nearest street that headed in the direction the caterpillar had indicated. It was called Bandersnatch Boulevard. A rather strange name for a street that looked so completely ordinary. People milled about, stepping in and out of shops, none of them paying any particular attention to her.

She guessed that was a little strange in itself, considering she was a thirteen-year-old girl walking alone on a street in the middle of the night. It made her feel like more of an adult. The further she walked, the more neon lights and advertisement screens appeared.

The people also got more strange. One person in three didn't look human at all. There were some people who looked like angels from religious stories with white feathery wings, and some who looked like devils with red skin and horns. Some didn't resemble humans at all, more like animals, like Absolem; though none of them looked like a caterpillar.

While she couldn't see anyone noticeably watching her, Alice could feel the pressure of eyes on her skin. She made a couple of turns at random, but the feeling stayed with her. Her pace quickened, her shoes smacking on the sidewalk with loud slaps. Her hand drifted down to the hilt of her sword. It didn't make sense that she couldn't see the eyes she could feel boring into the back of her head. If they were following her, she should have been able to see them by now.

"Where are you?" she asked herself.

"Now that's a silly question to ask. You're always exactly where you're standing," said a sly voice directly behind her.

Alice practically jumped out of her skin, turning about on her heel so fast that it made her dizzy. But there was nobody there. Not even so much as a mouse digging through the trash. "Just the wind," she said, though there didn't seem to be the slightest breeze.

"Oh yes, now you're talking to the wind, that's ever so much better than asking yourself silly questions," came the snide voice again, still behind her

somehow, even though she'd just turned around.

"You might be better served by asking who you are. Knowing yourself is much more useful than knowing someone else," said Alice, spinning again in an attempt to find the source of the voice.

"Oh, wonderful. Who are you then?" asked the voice, behind her yet again.

Alice didn't bother spinning this time. Someone was obviously playing a trick on her and getting dizzy spinning around in circles would only make them laugh all that much harder. "I'm Alice."

"Mrew, disappointing," said the voice, this time directly in front of her with no visible source.

"That doesn't make sense. How can being Alice, be disappointing? Were you expecting someone else?"

"No, I asked who you are, not what your name is. That clearly means you don't know who you are, which is disappointing." The voice this time came from a mouth a few feet in front of her at about her eye level. That wouldn't have been at all peculiar if the mouth were attached to a head, or anything at all.

Alice took a step back, not sure what to make of the floating mouth, and a pair of eyes joined it, roughly where eyes would be on a normal face. The eyes weren't particularly normal, with their strange slitted pupils, but at least they gave her something to focus on other than the pointed teeth in the mouth. With the addition of the eyes, the almost-face started to look a little familiar.

"Well, disappointing or not, I'm Alice. Who are you?" she asked.

"Oh, I'm many things and also none of those things when I choose to be. Like many people, I change, depending on my mood and those that I find myself in the company of." The mouth turned up in a proud grin, very satisfied with its answer. "I could go on, if you like, Disappointing Alice."

"Argh!" groaned Alice. "Why must everyone here be so difficult to get a simple answer from?"

"Perhaps it's because you aren't very good at asking simple questions," replied the mouth. "That's generally a good thing. Simple questions come from a simple mind."

"I don't have time for this nonsense," huffed Alice. She turned slowly, trying to find her direction again. "Now you've gone and confused me. I don't know which direction I was going."

“That way,” replied the mouth and eyes, no hint of sarcasm in its voice.

“You do realize that you didn’t point or in any way indicate which direction I was traveling,” said Alice, crossing her arms.

The mouth and eyes somehow managed to look abashed. “Of course I did, you just weren’t able to see it. Just because one can’t see a thing, doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.” Alice groaned. “I must apologize though, for my lack of illumination. Sometimes I forget to make myself known. Old habits and all that.”

Slowly, as if emerging from fog, a face covered in dark gray hair took shape around the mouth and eyes, and then a lithe body took shape below, forming a cat-like person, a few inches taller than Alice. One arm was held out, a finger indicating a direction just over her right shoulder. He wasn’t the strangest creature that she had seen since landing on Wonderland, though he was peculiar. His bright eyes and knowing grin were a bit disturbing. The suit he wore gave him the appearance of someone respectable. The hat, worn at a jaunty angle, gave him a roguish look. He looked as if he not only knew where Alice kept her stash of candy, but had eaten it three days ago without her noticing. It wasn’t entirely clear what his reasons were for helping her and she knew there was little chance he would ever tell her.

“Thank you, I really must be on my way to the palace docks, I have business to attend to,” said Alice, turning to follow the direction the cat had indicated.

“I’m not really sure what you’re thanking me for. I was the one that got you turned around in the first place,” said the cat.

Alice turned to face the cat again, her brow furrowed. “That’s right, you did.”

“And there’s nothing to say that I didn’t point you in the wrong direction just now, either.”

“Oh, bugger,” groaned Alice.

“Though I didn’t.”

“Right,” said Alice, relief washing over her. She turned and headed off again.

“Unless I’m lying,” called the cat, still standing in the same spot.

Alice stomped back to him, pinning him with her strongest glare. “This is infuriating.”

“Only because you aren’t using your head,” replied the cat, his body vanishing once again, leaving only his head floating before her.

“I’m starting to get tired of everyone in this place telling me how to think. I’ve only talked to three people from here and they’ve all said basically the same thing.”

“I would think that if everyone was telling you the same thing, that you might decide to try listening, especially when they are just telling you to use your brain,” purred the cat. “Now, ask me one more question and make it a good one. One you’ve put some thought into.”

For a few seconds, Alice pondered just leaving. Then, the more she thought about it, the more she realized that she did need more information; even wrong information told her something. “If you were me, how would you go about finding one of the queen’s ships and getting off this planet?”

“Oh, good question. You can do some thinking after all. I’ve made up my mind to like you, Alice,” said the cat. The rest of his head disappeared, leaving only his grinning mouth.

“Aren’t you going to answer my question?”

“Some day, I may, if it suits me.”

“Well, this has been an extraordinary waste of time,” said Alice with a sigh.

“Quite extraordinary indeed, thank you, Alice.”

“You’re welcome,” Alice said automatically, her manners getting the best of her. That annoying cat was most certainly not welcome. She started to tell him so when she realized that his grin had disappeared along with the rest of him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Once the cat was gone, Alice did a bit of thinking on her own and found her way back to Bandersnatch Boulevard. From there it was just a short walk to The Red Palace.

The place was a massive tower, looming over the rest of the buildings around it. Considering the high-tech landscape of the Wonderland she'd seen so far, the fact that the palace was a skyscraper shouldn't have been a surprise. It just seemed strange that a real queen existed, but she didn't live in a proper castle. The massive glowing sign at the top of the building left no question though.

Come see the Red Queen battle for dominance in the croquet match of the century, only at The Red Palace!

Hordes of people flowed in and out of the doors, chattering excitedly. Alice approached slowly, looking for signs that would direct her to where the ships were kept. She had no desire to watch the queen play croquet. As she approached she heard a strange popping noise, and then a whole chorus of them.

“The Red Palace has the best girls.” *Pop. Pop. Pop.*

“Clean girls.” *Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop.*

Men and women lined the sidewalk in front of The Red Palace, their arms outstretched to the people passing by. Mostly they were ignored, sometimes they were shoved.

Alice had seen beggars before, when she went to the capital with her father. It was never a pleasant sight. Usually she would ask her father for some money and would give it to them along with a smile. They rarely smiled back, but when they did, it made her day.

This time she didn't have any money to offer them, so she decided to at least give them a smile since they were being treated so badly. Once she approached though, she realized they weren't beggars at all. Their outstretched hands weren't empty, waiting to be filled. Instead, they held small cards with colorful pictures on them.

“Girls. All shapes, sizes, colors.” *Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop.*

The popping was them flicking the cards to get people’s attention. It was surprisingly aggressive for such a small noise. By the time she realized her mistake, she was too close to avoid them. As she walked by, a dozen hands held out cards for her, pulling them back just before she walked into them. She was able to ignore the first six or seven. Eventually, the incessant popping pulled her attention to their hands and before she could look away the card was in her hand.

It was the size of a standard business card, glossy black with a naked woman sprawled across it. A phone number was written across the top in bright pink. On the back were written various services that Alice didn’t understand with a price next to each one.

She stared at it blankly for a moment, not exactly sure what to make of it. It didn’t make any sense. Why were there random people out on the street, handing out small pictures of naked women? Then it clicked. These women were selling their bodies...for sex. Alice looked around hurriedly, concerned that someone would see her with the card, that she would be in trouble. She could feel her cheeks burning. Nobody paid her the slightest bit of attention, including the people handing out the cards.

She stuffed it in her pocket, determined to find a trash can to dispose of it. The sidewalk was already littered with the lewd cards, but she couldn’t compound her guilt over having taken the card with littering as well.

“Some pirate you are,” she berated herself, heading for the main doors of the building. “You read about men on pirate ships going ‘wenching’ all the time. You know what it means, but you practically wet yourself just because you got handed a card with a hooker’s number on it. You’re not a child any more. It’s time you started acting like it.”

Inside, a wall of sounds assaulted her ears. People cheered and groaned from every direction, accompanied by the sounds of bells, electronic beeping, and the clatter of coins. The air was thick with smoke that tickled the back of her throat and made her cough. To her right was a huge room full of machines. People stood in front of them, pressing buttons or pulling handles. They fed them coins and occasionally coins spilled out of the bottom into a metal tray. It took her a moment to realize what they were. Slot machines. To her left was another room, just as large, but full of green tables with people around them, playing cards.

The Red Palace was a casino.

Alice almost turned around and walked right back out the door. On Nedra you couldn't gamble until you were eighteen years old, and even then, her parents had taught her that gambling was something only the weak-minded did. Thoughts of her parents disapproval pushed her forward. If her parents didn't approve, then maybe she should give it a try. After all, they didn't want her to be a pirate, either.

"Shouldn't they check your ID before they let you just walk into a casino?" asked Alice of no one in particular.

"If you've got money, the red queen doesn't care if you're in diapers," barked someone passing by, their breath smelling heavily of liquor and cigarettes.

Directly in front of her was a bank of elevators with large signs next to them. That seemed like as good a place as any to start. She briefly entertained the idea of asking someone where the ship docks would be, but discarded it after thinking about her encounter with the cat.

One of the signs next to the elevator indicated airship parking was on the tenth floor. Perhaps she could have her ship and be on her way within the hour.

Alice stepped off the elevator into an area that was very similar to a parking garage, just much taller. Ships of various shapes and sizes were positioned throughout the massive space. It took up an entire floor of the casino. It would probably take her the better part of an hour to search the whole area.

"Well, nothing for it but to get to looking around," she said to herself, sighing heavily.

Her mind drifted to the adventures she planned to have as soon as she had her ship. The first one, obviously, would be finding a crew. In the great pirate adventures, the captain always put in at a known pirate port and headed to a tavern. There were always men hanging about in taverns, waiting to find a ship to set sail on. It probably wouldn't take too much asking around to get someone to point her toward someplace with disreputable pirate types in this city. She could probably just go back down to the casino floor and ask three or four people.

That made her smile. If there was a place that was ripe for pirating, Wonderland was it. All she had to do was find her ship and get to it.

After a few minutes of wandering she came to an area that was fenced off. Placed periodically, were large signs in the shape of blood red hearts

proclaiming: Keep out! Property of the Red Queen.

Alice stepped close and peered through the metal mesh. There were dozens of ships beyond the fence. One of them had to be The White Rabbit. She walked hurriedly along the fence, scanning for a way through. The top of the fence was four meters in the air and covered with lots of nasty looking razor wire, so that wasn't an option. Rounding a corner brought a gap in the fence into view, but there were two crazy looking guards standing in front of it.

Each guard was wearing what looked like armor out of a fantasy story: helmets, chainmail, gauntlets and various other pieces that had hard to pronounce names. They paced around, clattering loudly, large long-handled axes resting on their shoulders. The craziest part was that their bodies were almost perfect rectangles with only the smallest notch out of the bottom for their legs, and they were nearly flat. Alice was a thin girl and they were easily half as thin as she was. On the front of their armor was painted the design of a playing card. One was a two of hearts and the other a four of hearts. If their weapons and armor hadn't looked so wicked, Alice would have laughed out loud.

Thankfully they were a hundred or more meters away and her area of the parking garage was rather poorly lit, so they likely couldn't see her. Just in case, she ducked back around her corner and watched them with one eye poking around the fence for much longer than was strictly necessary. Their heads and arms looked human enough. Their bodies looked as if someone had simply smashed them flat in order to make them resemble playing cards. As to be expected from someone with a smashed body, they didn't look at all very happy. Once she'd had her fill of gawking at the guards, she peered down the length of fence and spotted a small gap between two poles. It was very narrow.

She paced down the length of fence and kept one eye on the guards, thankful for the poor lighting. It would be a tough squeeze, but if she could just get inside, she was sure she could get her ship outside through one of the large openings in the side of the building that the ships passed in through.

Alice sucked in a deep breath and pushed into the gap. She had a moment of panic where she thought she would have to shout for help from the guards to get back out of the fence. After a lot of wiggling and some pretty nasty scrapes, she popped through and tumbled to the concrete floor.

CHAPTER SIX

The ships in the queen's special section of the docks varied greatly. Most of them were much more ostentatious looking than The White Rabbit, but as far as Alice could tell, none of them were alive. One small ship looked like it was designed to carry a single passenger and was very sleek and sharp. It was strikingly familiar. Alice was certain that she'd seen something like it before. Once she got close enough, she spotted a Nedran flag on the nose of the craft. It was a Talon! One of the brand new fighter ships designed to fight off the Colarians. It didn't make any sense for it to be in the red queen's collection, but there it sat, looking beautiful and deadly. It was tempting to try to take a look inside, but Alice reminded herself that she already had a ship and she could be caught by guards at any moment.

Just when her nerves started to get the best of her and she was about to head back through the gap in the fence, The White Rabbit came into view at the back of the garage. To Alice he looked sad and lonely. She knew just what to do about that.

"Hello, Rabbit," said Alice, trying to keep her tone down.

The White Rabbit didn't respond.

"Are you sleeping, Rabbit?" she asked, wondering if he was actually able to close his eyes, if in fact the clear spots on his rabbit-like face actually were eyes.

Still, The White Rabbit said nothing and made no move to indicate it knew of her presence. It was still hovering off the ground, so being asleep didn't seem likely.

Alice stepped closer and wrapped gently on the ship's white hull with her knuckles as if she were knocking on a door. "Are you in there, Rabbit?"

"Now that's just a ludicrous question," snapped Rabbit. "Of course I'm 'in here'. If I weren't I would literally have to be out of my mind. Hmph."

"Then why didn't you respond when I spoke to you before? Were you asleep?"

“No, I wasn’t asleep. I don’t sleep, not that it should concern you,” hissed Rabbit. “What should concern you is the fact that I’m not happy with you and I was choosing to ignore you until you decided to go wrapping on my hull and asking the stupidest question I’ve ever heard. Now, kindly go away and leave me to my boredom.”

“Please, keep your voice down,” whispered Alice. “I don’t want to get caught in here. Those guards out there didn’t look to be very nice people, if they were people at all.”

“You mean you didn’t even get permission to come back here and talk to me?”

Alice looked all around her, her eyes peeled for any movement. Rabbit’s voice was still unreasonably loud, but she didn’t want to ask him to keep quiet again. It just seemed to make him more angry. “I had no intention of just coming back here to talk to you, I planned on taking you out of here. Somehow I didn’t think that the queen would think too highly of me stealing a ship right out of her own palace.”

“Right you are on that account.” Rabbit laughed. It was a strange whistling snort that made Alice smile, even if it did seem to be at her expense. “But what makes you think I would ever leave this place with an intolerable brat such as yourself?”

Alice took a step back, her brow furrowed in confusion. “Why would you say such a mean thing to me?”

“Because you are treating me like property,” sniffed Rabbit, sounding wounded.

“But, I don’t understand. You are property,” said Alice. “It clearly even says so on the signs around this very spot.”

“Just because the queen says I’m her property and treats me as such, doesn’t mean that I am. I am a person, just the same as you, and I will not tolerate children who think they can give me a name and then claim they own me. At least the red queen can provide me with a proper shelter to keep me out of the wet even if she does threaten to have me beheaded from time to time. Could you provide me with such a thing?”

“Well, I hadn’t thought—”

“Of course not,” chided Rabbit. “You hadn’t taken the time to think about how I might feel about being stolen and made to serve your purposes instead of my own. How typical.”

“I—I’m sorry,” stammered Alice. Her head turned down to the floor and her cheeks burned with shame. “I just got carried away. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. I think you’re a very lovely person. You deserve much more than to have to serve a mean old woman who threatens to cut off your head.”

“You don’t think that I know that? If it weren’t for the tracking device I would have struck out on my own a long time ago.”

“I could try to help you get rid of that,” said Alice cautiously. “It’s the least I could do for treating you like property.”

“Hmmm,” said Rabbit, as if he were thinking very hard. Alice could tell that he was being coy because he wasn’t sure if he wanted to forgive her. “Very well. I doubt you’ll be able to help, but I’m willing to let you try.”

“Halt!” came a shout from just down the row of ships. One of those strange looking card men was charging toward her, his axe waving menacingly. “Halt in the name of the queen!”

“Run,” hissed The White Rabbit.

Alice bolted down the row of ships, turning as soon as she was out of sight of the guard. She turned left a couple of times, hoping she could circle back to The White Rabbit. She was certain he’d forgiven her and would help her out of this mess if only she could get back to him. Her heart was hammering in her ears and her breath was coming in ragged gasps.

There was no way to escape the fenced in area. She only had two options: hide, or get on a ship and fly out. A shout came from just off to her right, so Alice turned left again. How could they be tracking her so well? She hadn’t seen a guard since the first one charged at her. Then, over her puffs of breath, she realized she could hear the loud clacking of her hard soled shoes hitting the concrete floor. They were as good as a homing beacon. Alice skidded to a stop, but overbalanced herself and tumbled forward. The floor rushed up to greet her, but the impact never came.

Strong arms lifted her to her feet, none too gently. Alice shook her blonde hair out of her face and found herself staring at a chest decorated to look like a five of hearts. “By the authority of the queen of hearts, you are under arrest and will be jailed until her majesty reviews the charges against you and passes sentence.”

Alice reached for the sword at her waist. “Not if I have anything to say about it,” retorted Alice, drawing her sword. Before the guard could react,

she slashed out and whacked him in the shin. The blunted blade didn't draw any blood, but it was plenty heavy enough to cause pain.

Alice crowed in triumph and ran the other direction, the guard shouting obscenities behind her. Adrenaline surged through her veins, giving her an extra burst of speed. Maybe she would actually get away and find her way back to The White Rabbit and off of this mad planet.

Maybe not.

At top speed Alice plowed into another card guard that jumped out in front of her. They went down in a tangle of limbs, mostly Alice's. His were too short to really get tangled. They weren't, however, too short to grab hold of her and shake her sword loose from her hand. It tumbled to the concrete floor with a metallic clatter and took Alice's hopes of escape with it.

A few moments later the other guard arrived, limping slightly. Alice grinned while the other guard manhandled her to her feet. The limping guard stepped forward and viciously swung the metal club he carried at her ribs. Pain exploded through her chest like nothing she'd ever felt before. That wasn't any ordinary club. She'd taken her share of falls and even broken a rib before on a particularly nasty one. The pain was terrible, but so very different from the bite of that club. It clawed through her body like a rampaging animal, bent on destroying everything in its path. All thought was impossible. The world was a red-hot blur. Her vision blurred with hot tears and her ears ached from a piercing shriek.

After what felt like an eternity but was probably only a few seconds, the strange clawing pain of the club's magic dissipated, leaving only the dull ache of its relatively weak physical blow. She would only have a bruise for a couple of days. Alice found her mouth was open and her throat was raw. The shriek hadn't been something caused by the club's magic, it had been her own howling voice.

The guards each rubbed their ears and then gestured with their clubs for her to walk in front of them. Alice wasted no time complying. She only spared a glance for her fallen sword, apologizing mentally to her father for its loss. She'd do anything to avoid the pain promised by those horrible metal clubs.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Red Palace holding cells weren't at all what Alice imagined they would be. She'd pictured something dark and dank in a basement, with iron bars and stone floors. In short, she'd expected a dungeon. Instead, Alice was led by two of the cards to an elevator and taken to the fortieth floor. Neither of them spoke and Alice was too frightened to ask questions.

They ushered her off the elevator with gentle nudges from the clubs they held in their hands. Alice lunged away from them, not wanting to feel their awful pain again. The guards laughed at her awkward wriggling. There was no pain to accompany their touch this time. It must have been something they could turn on and off. Alice turned and stared at the guards and their clubs. She noticed there was a round red button on the handles.

One of the guards caught the path of her eyes and reached up to press the button. A wicked hum filled the elevator and he stepped forward. Alice turned around and hurried down the hallway. The guards laughed again and Alice wished for her lost sword. Clubs or not, she would make them pay for her burning humiliation.

After a couple of turns down nondescript beige hallways, they turned into a room lined with clear plastic cells. Most held miserable looking occupants who didn't bother to look up. It was nothing like the jails Alice had seen in the movies, where the prisoners all hooted and hollered, banging on their bars, shouting their innocence. The air in the jail room seemed heavy and oppressive. It made Alice's skin crawl and her shoulders slump. She looked in at every prisoner as she walked past and found each of them staring blankly into the distance, except for one.

That prisoner sat on his cot, arms wrapped around himself while he rocked slowly. He looked Alice directly in the eyes, but never stopped chanting. "Off with his head, off with his head."

That's when Alice realized what she was feeling in the room that made her skin crawl: hopelessness. She'd only ever seen it in one person before. There had been a picture of a man in the news. He'd suffered some sort of

mental break and been arrested for trying to jump off an overpass and into traffic. That same look was mirrored in all the faces around her. Not a single one of the prisoners expected anything good would ever happen to them again.

“Open cell two thirty-seven,” called one of the guards. The other one gripped her upper arm tight enough to bruise.

A loud buzz sounded and the clear plastic door slid up into the ceiling. Alice pushed back away from the door, but the guard was ready for that. He’d obviously done this task countless times before. Her panic level rose along with her pulse. Her vision started to go dark at the edges and her knees grew weak. Without missing a beat, the guard dropped his club to hang from a strap around his wrist and propped her up with his other arm.

“In you go,” he said, almost sounding like a father putting an unwilling child to bed.

“Stop!” called a cool, crisp woman’s voice from the end of the hall.

The guard released his grip on Alice’s arms immediately and snapped to attention. Alice stumbled a few steps into the cell before she caught her balance and turned around. The door was still open. The jail had gone eerily quiet except for the click of heels on the marble floor. The guards that had escorted her stared down the hallway, sweat pouring down their faces that wasn’t there just a moment before.

Alice tried to look down the hall through the clear cell walls, but all she could see was a blurry red shape through the thick plastic. After what felt like an eternity of clicking a woman appeared in front of her cell. She was tall, even without the heels, much taller than Alice’s mother, and possibly taller than her father. And she was strikingly beautiful, with skin as perfect as a porcelain doll and full red lips that pouted into a heart shape. Her eyes were a deep emerald green that practically sparkled. Her hair was pulled up into a neat bun and topped with a crown of diamonds and rubies.

There was no one feature that made her particularly intimidating, other than her height. If you focused on her eyes, or mouth alone, she might even appear pleasant. Taken as a whole, from head to toe, she exuded fierceness like a lioness. It wasn’t a facade that was put on and could be discarded any easier than a lioness could discard her large teeth and jaws. It was her nature.

“What have we here?” asked the queen, her identity obvious without any need for introduction.

“A trespasser in the royal docks, my queen,” said the five of hearts.

“Nothing you need to concern yourself with, my queen,” said the four of hearts. He immediately gasped and covered his mouth. He was the guard who’d hit her with his club.

“I’ll be the one to decide what concerns me,” said the queen, in a conversational tone. She stepped into the cell and smiled down at Alice. “Off with his head!”

Outside the cell there was the distinct sound of a sword being drawn and then a scream was cut short. Thick red liquid splashed across the clear plastic of the cell, followed by a smaller thud and then a larger one. Alice was thankful that her view was blocked by the queen. Even so, she imagined the guard’s head tumbling to the floor, his mouth still open. The queen didn’t seem to give it a second thought. She looked Alice over from head to toe and then back to her hair. She took a lock of it between her fingers and smiled. “Such beautiful hair. So rare to find a blonde in Wonderland.”

“Th-thank you,” stammered Alice. It seemed strange to be exchanging pleasantries while a corpse was cooling just out of view, but some part of her knew it would be a mistake not to answer. Another part, something deep down inside where she hoped nobody would ever see, was a bit glad he was dead. The memory of the pain that club caused would haunt her nightmares.

Behind the queen was a lot of metal clanking and grunting. Another couple of soldiers had arrived and were bent over the corpse visible just behind the queen’s feet. Alice noticed the queen’s feet were rather small for a person her height. Like the rest of her clothing, her shoes were a deep red that Alice now recognized as the color of dried blood.

“So, what were you doing at the royal docks, my little beauty?” asked the queen, though she didn’t seem particularly interested to hear the answer. Her eyes were focused on the distance as if she were lost in thought.

The queen’s lack of interest in a question she’d just asked provoked Alice to tell the truth. Just as she was about to open her mouth, however, the queen began to pace, unblocking her view of the dead guard. Two of his comrades were hefting his headless body, still oozing dark blood from the neck. A third guard held his head under his arm as if it were a helmet. They all trudged away silently, like they were doing the most menial task they could imagine, instead of carrying away the body of one of their own dead,

whose only crime was saying something the queen didn't like. If they bore the queen any ill will, they didn't show it in the slightest.

Alice fought the urge to vomit. Bile burned her throat, reminding her that she hadn't eaten in quite a long time. The queen continued to pace, one delicate finger tapping her chin. If Alice didn't answer soon her head may be on the floor. "I was down there talking to your living ship. It took me away from my world and I was just trying to get it to take me back home."

"A bloody nuisance, that ship is, always running off and having to be brought back. If it weren't so exceedingly rare and such a good conversation piece I'd have had its head long ago. Assuming it even has a head." The queen stopped pacing in front of Alice and cupped her chin in her hand. "You would never dream of being such a problem, would you my dear?"

"Never, your majesty," said Alice wholeheartedly. She didn't want to do anything to get on this woman's bad side.

"Wonderful," said the queen, a small cackle escaped her lips along with the word. "I think I shall take great pleasure in showing you off at the croquet match. Do you play croquet?"

"Yes, your majesty. I've played quite a lot with my parents," said Alice. Her rapidly pounding heart began to slow. Maybe she could go play a game of croquet with the queen of Wonderland and then be on her way. While she hadn't gotten her ship back, at least she could leave with her head. She'd find another way to get him back later.

"A rare beauty, and you know how to play croquet. I think you shall be the most prized thing in my menagerie. Perhaps I've been too hard on that ship. He does bring in the most lovely things sometimes." The queen turned on her heel and headed out the door of the cell. Alice stood stock still, unsure if she should follow or not. "Come along dear."

Alice heaved a sigh of relief and followed behind the queen, doing her best not to look at the blood that was now being mopped up by a young girl whose face and arms were covered in puckered scars. Things were definitely not right in this place. The queen was demented in a way that didn't seem to make any sort of sense. Perhaps Rabbit had been right, most of Wonderland was mad and if she tried to point it all out, she'd never do anything else. At least the queen had taken her away from the jail. For now, it seemed the best way to keep her head was to play along as if everything

were just as normal as a stroll in the park. Still, it bothered her the way the queen talked about her like she was hers.

They passed from the jail area without comment from the guards. Four of them stepped into formation around Alice and the queen when they walked by. Alice pulled back from them reflexively, expecting one of them to grab her.

“Don’t worry dear, nobody here shall harm you while you’re with me,” said the queen. It was meant to be soothing. All Alice could hear was the implied *not if they value their heads*.

They stepped into the elevator and one of the guards poised his hand in front of the control panel. “Fifty-two,” said the queen. It was the top floor of the palace. The guard punched the number and the elevator rushed upward.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The top floor of The Red Palace was truly a sight to behold. Most of the floor was open, allowing a spectacular view of all the amazing acts going on. The ceiling was at least ten meters tall and higher in some places, such as the acrobatics area, where three people balanced on top of one another on a high wire about forty meters above the bare wood floor. If one of them fell they would surely die.

Most of the people in the room paid little attention to the mind-blowing acts going on around them. They stood in groups of four or five near tables of food grand enough to serve several hundred people when there weren't more than a hundred people in attendance. It was obvious from their clothing and bearing that these were important and powerful people. Just the sort of people you would expect to attend a party with a queen.

Alice felt woefully underdressed in her simple blue dress. It was her favorite, but not nearly fancy enough for a party this spectacular. She found herself lagging behind the queen in an attempt to draw less attention to herself as they made their way toward a stage set up on one side of the room.

"Come along, dear, we mustn't keep my guests waiting," said the queen, turning to wave at Alice. The gesture actually felt benign this time, with no implied threat.

"But, I'm hardly dressed for such a fancy occasion," said Alice, her steps growing smaller and slower the closer the stage loomed.

The queen turned and came back to her, a flicker of what could have been concern in her eyes. "Nonsense, dear, you are a beautiful young woman in a lovely blue dress and you are my companion for the evening. I can assure you that you'll fit in wonderfully."

Alice nodded skeptically, eyeing the stage. The thought of standing up on a stage in front of a room full of rich and powerful people made her want to bolt. Only the four guards with their swords and clubs kept her from trying it. "Do I have to go up there, though?"

The queen looked up at the stage and then down at Alice, her green eyes turning soft with concern. “Oh, little one, you have stage fright. How thoughtless of me. This would be an intimidating situation for someone not used to such things.”

“Yes,” said Alice, not sure if she could trust the queen’s seemingly genuine concern. She glanced at the sword on the belt of the guard nearest to them.

The queen followed her gaze and a wicked smile lit up her face. “Well, how about we get you something to make you feel more comfortable, my little morsel.”

The queen turned and marched off toward a set of double doors that were flanked by two more guards, holding poleaxes crossed before them. They straightened their weapons immediately upon seeing the queen headed their way. One moved quickly to swing the doors wide. The hall beyond was lined with evenly spaced doors on either side, each one about ten meters apart.

“Welcome to my collection of beautiful and powerful things,” said the queen, stopping at the third door on the right. She placed her hand on a panel next to the door and a wave of blue light washed over it. “If you continue to please me, I may show you through all the rooms one day. For now, I have something that should banish your stage fright.”

There was a resounding click that echoed through the hallway and the wooden door swung inward. It was then that Alice realized there was no handle on it. The queen stepped inside and gestured for Alice to follow. While the door looked like a normal wooden door from the outside, it was actually just a wood panel over a thick, steel vault door. The air inside the vault was very dry and a bit stale, smelling like old pennies.

“Lights,” called the queen, and a plethora of spotlights turned on, each of them glinting off a shiny piece of metal. Swords, shields, armor, and various weapons Alice couldn’t describe, stood on pedestals around the room.

“This is amazing,” said Alice, her mind racing with the possibilities of plundering the vault. Everything in there looked like it was priceless beyond her wildest dreams; covered in gems and gold. Surely none of these things were used for fighting and were meant only for show. Just selling one piece would probably outfit an entire crew in good practical pirating gear.

“Oh, it’s but one of my little treasures. Weapons are so rarely made beautiful or interesting. They are tools for killing and thus, usually made so

practical. Most of these pieces were made for kings and queens who would never see battle, but wanted to play at it during parades and state dinners.” The queen walked toward the center of the room and stopped at a pedestal containing a single sword. A strange, luminescent bubble surrounded it, making the details of the weapon hard to make out. It was the only one in the room she could see that had any sort of added protection. “Hand me something you wish to dispose of.”

Alice reached into her pockets, though she had very little. The queen had made it an order, and disobeying one of her orders clearly wasn’t an option. All she had in her dress pockets were the mushroom the caterpillar had given her and the smutty business card the guy on the street had handed her. Even though the mushroom was probably worthless, she didn’t want it destroyed, so she handed the queen the card, her cheeks burning with humiliation. “I didn’t mean to take it,” she said.

The queen smiled down at the card and then winked at Alice. “I won’t tell anyone, my dear. Liza is a rare beauty who has shared my bed on more than a few occasions. I think I’ll introduce the two of you later. I might even let you play with her for free.”

Alice’s cheeks went past burning as all of the color drained from her face. “But I wasn’t,” she stammered. The queen couldn’t possibly think she was holding the card with the intent of using it. The woman was quite beautiful, but she wasn’t ready for sex yet. And even when she was someday, she couldn’t picture herself hiring someone.

“Sure you weren’t, my little deviant.” The queen winked again and turned to face the strange bubble around the sword. Alice decided there was no further use in arguing.

“Now, watch closely.” The queen flicked the card at the bubble and it evaporated in a puff of smoke the instant it met its luminescent surface. “It could do the same to a full grown man.”

Alice gasped, her embarrassment about the card forgotten. She wasn’t certain she wanted to touch anything the queen felt the need to put behind something like that.

Something of her thoughts must have been expressed on her face because the queen addressed them. “That’s a high energy force field, the energy it takes to keep that on for a day could power a small village for a week. While the object behind it is valuable, it’s not nearly as valuable as the energy it takes to guard it. I put it behind that force field because it is

dangerous. It is the most dangerous weapon to ever have been forged in Wonderland.”

The queen reached up and touched another panel like the one next to the door. This time after the blue light passed over her hand, the bubble around the sword disappeared. Without the distorting effects of the force field, it was easy to see the sword, resting on a pair of raised hooks. It wasn’t a very large sword. For someone of Alice’s height it might be considered a bit on the long side, but for a large warrior type it would be quite short. The blade was straight and a couple of fingers in width. All down the length of it were carved strange looking runes and sigils. The hilt was wrapped in what appeared to be simple leather and the pommel was plain metal designed to balance the weight of the sword. There were no jewels on the crossguard either, just a simple, slightly curved piece of steel meant to protect the fighter’s hand from the opponent’s blade. This weapon wasn’t meant for decoration. It was meant to be used.

After a slight hesitation, the queen reached up and lifted the sword from its display rack. A metal ting rang through the air. It didn’t dissipate until the queen gently caressed the flat side of the blade. “This, dear girl, is the vorpal sword. It is said to have been forged by elves eons ago. One of four such swords given to each of the four kings of Wonderland as gifts. They each bore the symbols of their kingdoms at the base of the blade. This was forged for the King of Hearts.” She held the blade down for Alice to see the stylized heart etched at the base of the blade. “The runes are said to say the blade’s name: Snicker-snack.”

“It’s beautiful,” said Alice, mesmerized. She could feel something radiating from the blade, almost like a sound, just beyond her hearing. She felt the need to touch it, to hold it tight, and charge into battle for glory and honor.

“And most importantly, deadly,” said the queen, holding it out to Alice with her palms up. “Nobody will be able to hurt you as long as you carry this blade, so you have nothing to fear. You would cut down the entire crowd out there in an instant, should you choose. I give that power to you so that you can feel safe and accompany me to greet the peers of Wonderland and make them jealous.” The last bit was said with a mischievous grin that made Alice feel like a co-conspirator.

Alice found herself reaching for the sword on instinct. She paused, just before taking the hilt, remembering her manners and who she was dealing

with. "May I?" she asked, her fingers trembling.

"Of course you may," said the queen, a delighted grin spreading across her red lips. "So polite. You'll make an excellent addition to my menagerie."

Alice didn't hear most of what the queen said after "Of course" because her hand locked around the hilt of the vorpal sword and it filled her mind with exquisite music. It promised to fulfill her every need and wish and to smite her enemies in a rush of song so sweet it practically brought tears to her eyes. It also promised to teach her the pure and unadulterated joy of combat for a worthy cause. She liked that thought and mentally asked for a demonstration. The sword obliged, teaching her a quick blade flourish that was more about flash than actual substance, but felt beautiful.

Alice was pulled from her reverie by the queen's delighted cheer and the clap of her hands. "Oh, that was wonderful! You didn't tell me you knew how to handle a sword so well. You continue to surprise and delight me, young lady."

The song dimmed in her mind, but never quite went away, allowing her to focus on her present needs, though she knew it was ready for battle at a moment's notice. The queen stepped closer, a belt in her hand, a scabbard clearly designed for the vorpal sword dangling from it. Alice grudgingly slid it inside the scabbard and took the belt, wrapping it around her waist. It was only slightly too large, much like the sword itself.

Immediately after belting it into place, she rested her hand on the pommel and the sword responded to her doubts about the queen's story. It told her there was no magic in the blade, that it was made with only the most advanced science and technology and that it was in fact only thirteen years old, just like herself. It would have continued to tell of its history, had the queen not caught her attention again by turning and walking toward the door. "Come along, my little warrior, we have people to impress."

CHAPTER NINE

The queen gave a long, boring speech up on the stage, saying how glad she was that everyone could be in attendance, and how much she missed them all. To Alice, it all came off as far too obvious flattery, but the rest of the crowd enjoyed it. A crowd of the rich and powerful, it seemed, reveled in flowery compliments with little substance.

Alice kept her hand on Snicker-snack's pommel the entire time, trying to find a balance between listening to the sword's song and the queen's speech, knowing that she would be introduced on stage any time.

Eventually, she realized she was filtering everything the queen said through the sword and it was helping her cut through the surface meanings to find the hidden truth. The sword was a much more dangerous weapon than the queen had explained. Alice couldn't understand why the queen would have given her such a powerful weapon just to keep her feeling safe on stage.

"And now I present to you, the latest addition to my menagerie, young—" The queen paused, looked confused for a moment, and beckoned Alice over to the microphone.

"Alice," filled in Alice, a shy smile on her lips.

"Young Alice. She's quite the stunning little beauty, as you can all see. I'm sure many of you would like to get to know her better, so I'll make the rounds to introduce you before we move on to the croquet match." She gave Alice a predatory smile that made her skin crawl. "Mind your hands though folks, she's carrying the vorpal sword and she knows how to use it. Show them, Alice."

Alice obliged because she was dying to try out some of the moves the sword was parading through her head. She raised the sword in a classic en garde stance and then struck out in a couple of quick slashes, spun on her heel and lunged the other direction. There was a burst of surprised laughter and then cheers from the assembled crowd.

One man shouted a lewd comment and it was all Alice could do to keep herself from jumping down from the stage and running him through. Instead

she flicked the sword in a flourish and slammed it home into its scabbard, pulling her hand from the hilt for the first time in the last half hour. She turned and took a slight bow before stepping back to the side of the stage. The audience clapped excitedly and began to chatter amongst themselves. All eyes were for Alice, including the queen's, whose weren't nearly as amused as the rest of the spectators.

"Please, help yourselves to food and drink. Croquet will start in about two hours," said the queen. She stepped away from the microphone and took Alice by the arm, a little more roughly than was necessary to lead her. "Good show, darling Alice."

"Thank you, your majesty," said Alice, watching the crowd warily. Almost everyone in the room was casting furtive glances her way. More than a few openly stared and pointed while they talked about her. If it weren't for having her hand on the hilt of the sword, she would have bolted from the room.

It was only a few seconds after they stepped down from the stage that the first of them approached, a red faced man with a round belly and a large white mustache that reminded her of a walrus with its large tusks.

The queen stepped forward and greeted him, he bowed as best his belly would allow. "Your majesty," he said, his voice sounding a bit hoarse. "You must tell me where you found this girl. She swung that sword as if she were born with it in her hand."

That's when Alice noticed he had a sword hiding at his side, the hilt practically hidden by his girth. He and the queen chattered idly for a few minutes, the man pushing for more information and the queen providing none because she didn't have any. It obviously made her uncomfortable, so she eventually waved at a passerby and excused herself to talk to the next guest. The walrus stood there, mouth gaping open and pointing at Alice, to whom he'd never even been introduced.

They walked over to a woman in a green gown that sparkled with gems. A small tiara, similar in design to the queen's, rested on her red hair. "Laxana," said the queen, "I'm sure you would love to meet Alice, she's just your type."

"Of course I would, your majesty, though I'm not sure that I have a type, as it were," said the lady, giving a slight incline of her head and the slightest bend at the knee that was meant to be a curtsy.

Alice cringed, waiting for the queen to shout for someone to take her head for daring to disagree, even about their own opinion. There weren't any guards that were close by, so Alice worried the queen may expect her to do the deed. Instead, the queen laughed politely. "Oh, Laxana, there's no need to feign disinterest, you never could resist a blonde, and young and willing to learn makes it three for three."

The woman looked down at Alice, her green eyes sparkling with mischief. "Very well, you have me pegged. Will you introduce us already?"

"Of course," said the queen, her wicked grin returning. "Alice, I'd like you to meet Laxana, Duchess of Wonderland, and my dear friend."

The duchess extended her hand to Alice, palm down. She took it in her own because that much was obvious. What she was supposed to do other than that was beyond her. A quick glance at the queen showed her kissing the back of her own hand. The duchess pretended not to notice, though she had to be in her peripheral vision.

Alice did as she was expected and kissed the back of the duchess' hand. It was very smooth and soft. It was awkward to be kissing a stranger. Her unease was wiped away by their smiles. They looked so proud of her. "A pleasure to meet you, um, Your Majesty?" said Alice, making it a question because she wasn't sure what to call a duchess.

"Your Grace, actually," said the duchess, slowly drawing her hand back and giving Alice a dazzling smile. "Only a king or queen is called Your Majesty. And a pleasure to meet you as well, Alice."

The queen watched their exchange with veiled calculating eyes. "Laxana will, of course, be playing croquet with us. She's quite the player."

"Pish posh," said Laxana, her eyes only flicking away from Alice for a moment to look at the queen. "Everyone knows there's no croquet player in the kingdom who can hold a candle to you."

"There you go with your flattery. You know it won't get you anywhere," replied the queen, a silly grin on her face.

"Oh yes, but you do blush so prettily, I can't contain myself," said the duchess, finally turning back to face the queen.

Alice stopped paying much attention to their words after that. It was all idle banter and Alice had more important things on her mind, like the heavily laden table of food she could smell all the way across the room. She looked at it longingly as the queen and duchess prattled on about sums of

money that meant little to Alice. She was so hungry, she actually contemplated eating the mushroom in her pocket.

After a time Alice realized both of the women had stopped talking and were looking at her. They had probably asked her a question, but she hadn't heard it. "I'm sorry, did someone ask me a question?"

They both laughed heartily at that. Alice realized that the duchess was quite a bit younger than the queen, with very few laugh lines, and if possible, even more pretty. She didn't appear to be wearing any makeup either, which Alice found strange for such a public occasion. Her mother wouldn't ever be caught dead at a grand occasion like this one without her makeup on. Even her dress, which was beautiful, did seem less extraordinary than someone of her stature would wear to a grand party.

"I was asking if you might like to have something to eat, Alice," said the duchess, her radiant smile making Alice smile in return. "You look as if you might bite someone soon."

Alice blushed and turned her gaze back to the ladies. It had drifted back over to the food without her realizing. "Yes, that would be lovely, I feel as if I haven't eaten in days."

When she thought about it, she probably hadn't missed much more than her dinner the night before and her breakfast. She was amazed. As far as she'd ever heard, there was no such place as Wonderland within easy distance of Nedra, and she'd gotten there and had an adventure in less than a day. Either this was the most detailed dream of her life, or The White Rabbit truly was a remarkable ship.

Thinking about The White Rabbit made the wonderful delicacies she heaped on her plate seem much less tasty. While attending parties with royalty was nice, it wasn't nearly as fun as the pirating adventures she planned to have when she got her ship. The queen was being so nice now, it was hard to remember that just an hour or two ago, she'd had a man beheaded for an offhand remark. That thought put Alice off her food entirely. Despite the fact that it wasn't empty, a man wearing a crisp black tuxedo came over and took away her plate for her like he knew that she was done with it. It was like magic. She stared after him with a look of wonder on her face.

"The queen really does have the best servants. I think she must have hunted around for some with small amounts of empathic ability so they know just when and where they're needed." The duchess stood next to

Alice, sipping from a flute of champagne. She seemed to be enjoying herself quite well, a warm flush on her cheeks.

The queen had moved on to talk with other guests. Even as Alice looked over to them, they were pointing toward her and the duchess and seemed to be angry. Alice was torn as to whether she should follow the queen and looked askance at the duchess. “I was so involved with my food, I didn’t see her walk away.”

“Don’t worry yourself my dear, I’ve paid handsomely for your company this evening, so you won’t have to be dragged around to all the other guests of the party. We’ll receive plenty of jealous looks, but you needn’t worry about disappointing the queen.” The duchess winked over at the man who was with the queen, now waving wildly, his heavy jowls flapping and spittle flying from his lips.

He glared at the duchess; the queen said something too quiet to be heard from a distance and his anger washed away, leaving him slack jawed. He stared at the queen for a moment and then clamped his jaw shut and stalked off. The queen waved amiably over to Alice and Laxana and then turned and waded further into the party.

“I’m not the queen’s property to be auctioned off,” said Alice, glaring up at the duchess.

“Of course not, my dear, but she thinks you are, and playing along is the best way to keep your head,” said Laxana. She reached out and squeezed Alice’s shoulder reassuringly. “I just wanted to spend some time with you, and giving her money was the easiest way to accomplish that.”

“But why?”

“Why what, Alice?”

“Why do you want to spend time with me? I’m just a girl that you don’t know at all.” Alice regretted saying it as soon as the words were out of her mouth. Anything was better than staying with the queen and being paraded around for the whole evening. It just didn’t make any sense. “Your Grace,” she added belatedly, remembering her manners.

“Please, call me Laxana,” she said. She stared into the distance for so long that Alice decided she was going to ignore the rest of her question. Finally she said wistfully, “You remind me of myself.”

Alice couldn’t imagine how, but she wasn’t about to contradict her. The sword agreed, so Alice simply smiled and said, “Thank you.” She could feel

eyes boring into her, and glanced up in time to see the walrus flick his gaze from her to Laxana. “What do these other people want with me then?”

Laxana followed Alice’s gaze to the walrus. “Let’s just hope that you never have to learn the horrible things that are on their minds. Regardless of their ways of doing it, they all enjoy hurting people, and they love their trophies most of all.” Just then a woman walked by and Laxana pointed to the necklace she wore. It was a gold chain with human teeth dangling from it like disgusting charms.

Alice shuddered and stepped closer to Laxana, grateful for the protection her company offered.

CHAPTER TEN

The two hours the queen had promised for eating and chatting turned into at least four. Laxana eventually coaxed her into eating some more and asked her about her life. There wasn't much to tell, so mostly she ended up telling stories about her adventures with her cat, Dinah. Laxana seemed to genuinely enjoy them, smiling, laughing, and gasping in all the right places. The longer Alice was with her, the younger the duchess seemed, young enough to be a friend, except when she looked her directly in the eyes. Then she seemed older than even her mother.

Whenever Alice tried to turn a question Laxana asked back on her, the duchess simply shook her head and said, "I doubt you would find my life very interesting."

The sword was strangely silent while in the presence of the duchess, only singing of the joy of fighting and offering little insight into Laxana's words. It left her longing to put the sword to the test.

Finally, after what seemed a lifetime, the queen stepped back up to the stage and took the microphone. The chatter in the room came to an immediate halt. "Now everyone, it is the moment you've been waiting for. It is finally time for a rousing round of croquet."

The crowd cheered wildly, as if they were being treated to a finals game of football. Croquet was fun to play, but it wasn't exactly the most exciting spectator sport.

"I urge you all to adjourn to the roof," continued the queen, "where you'll be able to view the game on the Globe, the most spectacular screen ever invented. Tonight, in addition to myself, you'll have the pleasure of watching the duchess Laxana compete."

Another cheer erupted from the crowd. The duchess waved demurely and curtsied.

"And, young Alice," said the queen, waving a hand grandly toward Alice and the crowd went wild.

Alice copied the duchess as well as she could, though her wave was a bit awkward, and her curtsy was far from graceful. Her cheeks turned as red as a beet, but the crowd turned away and immediately began to chatter amongst themselves as they made their way toward one corner of the room. Laxana stayed behind, so Alice stayed with her. “Why will they be watching the game on a screen?” she asked.

“Oh that’s right, you’ve never been here before,” said Laxana, tilting her head back and shaking it at her own forgetfulness. “The croquet field isn’t exactly standard. Also, it’s in space.”

“What?” asked Alice, entirely certain that she hadn’t heard her correctly. “The croquet field is where?”

“In space,” repeated Laxana, a smile tugging at her pouty lips. “The queen doesn’t do anything by half measures. It’s not just a croquet field. It’s a giant sphere floating out in space that can generate a realistic, touchable holographic image of just about anything you can imagine. If it were just boring old croquet on a lawn on the roof, I wouldn’t waste my time, and neither would the rest of this lot.”

“That sounds an awful lot like science fiction,” hedged Alice, not wanting to seem like a gullible child when the duchess told her she was joking, but still getting excited at the idea of playing croquet in space.

“It *was* science fiction until the queen told someone to build it under penalty of losing their head. You’d be surprised what that kind of motivation can do to the right kind of person.” The smile drained from Laxana’s face and she turned to walk toward the elevator, beckoning Alice to follow.

They rode the elevator in silence, back down to the dock level. Alice kept glancing up to look at the duchess’ face to get a read on what she was thinking, but it was a mask of bland disinterest. Her eyes, however, didn’t reflect what Alice had expected. Gone was the solemn sadness of a few moments ago, replaced by a burning hatred that made her green eyes gleam. The sword suddenly gave her a flash of insight. “Did she hurt you?” asked Alice, keeping the question vague, like the vorpal sword had recommended.

“That’s all she knows how to do,” said Laxana, reaching up to wipe away a single tear. “You’d do well to remember that.” She pointed up to a tiny camera, barely visible in the corner.

The elevator opened to the docks and Laxana summoned a smile and stepped off, her heeled boots clicking on the cement floor. Alice longed to

hear the story she knew the duchess had to tell. If the queen had hurt her, why was she attending her parties and pretending to be her best friend? Adults didn't make a lot of sense sometimes.

She followed the duchess around the garage for a while, and then passed the guards at the gate. One of them was the guard who had beheaded his companion in front of her. He didn't look at her twice as she walked by with the duchess. There wasn't even the slightest trace of sadness on his face. That, for some reason, chilled Alice's blood worse than anything. The guard that died had been cruel to her and still, she felt sad that a life had been worth so little. The one who had taken his life probably hadn't even gotten a break after cleaning up his body.

By the time Alice realized the section of the docks she was walking to was familiar, she was standing in front of The White Rabbit again. His hatch was already open, and a small set of steps was placed in front of it to allow easier access, though it wasn't really needed. Even at her height, Alice could easily step inside without stairs. The duchess walked right up and into the ship, past the guards that flanked the hatch.

Alice followed, wanting badly to take out her sword, force everyone off except Laxana, and speed off into the night. Instead, she settled for a muttered, "Hello, Rabbit," and then followed Laxana up to the front of the ship.

"Oh, Alice, it's so good to see you with your head still attached. I thought for sure you would be on the chopping block tomorrow after the way the queen's nasty guards hauled you away," said Rabbit, not even bothering to whisper. Alice could plainly see the queen sitting in the front of the ship.

"What was that, dear?" asked Laxana, seemingly oblivious to what Rabbit had said. She gestured for Alice to take a seat next to her on a comfortable looking pink bench seat that rather resembled a couch. It was definitely a new addition to the ship, though it looked like it was made of the same soft spongy material as the rest of the ship's interior.

"Nothing, just saying hello to the ship," said Alice, her brows pinching together as she looked up toward the point she always thought of as the ship's nose.

"Well, don't expect an answer," replied the duchess, buckling herself into the seat. "We know it can talk, but its never said a word. And don't forget to buckle up. This thing bounces around like a bucking bronco. It must be the

worst ship in existence, but the queen loves it because its alive and that makes it rare.”

“And thus, better,” replied the queen with a sniff, obviously miffed at their lack of greeting. “Welcome aboard, ladies.” She sat in a single chair facing the front of the ship. She turned her head just enough to be able to see them out of the corner of her eye. “Pilot, take us up to the Imagisphere.”

“Ugh, now I have to pretend to let this dope fly me,” groaned Rabbit.

That’s when Alice noticed there was a man seated in the seat to the queen’s left and in front of him was a console and flight controls, much like she’d seen in pictures from other ships back on Nedra. None of it had been there during her flight to Wonderland. The ship lifted up a few feet and then slowly made its way toward the large doors that exited the building.

Immediately after they left the building, the ship began to climb at a steep angle, headed for space. It was a perfectly smooth ride.

“Well done, pilot,” said the queen, favoring him with a smile. His brow was dripping with sweat and he let out a large sigh of relief. “I think I shall have you fly me next time as well. None of your predecessors ever managed to take off so smoothly.”

“That’s because none of them were ever flying in the first place and I shake and shudder just to mess up your hair. I give myself bonus points if I can shake your crown loose, you wicked old bag.” While there was no face to accompany the words, Alice was certain Rabbit would look smug if she could see him.

Nobody reacted at all to Rabbit’s harsh words, except for Alice who had to cover a giggle with a cough. Once he’d spoken enough, it was clear that his words weren’t out loud. They were going directly into Alice’s mind.

Can you hear my thoughts too? thought Alice.

“Only if you want me to,” answered Rabbit. It still sounded like he was talking out loud and standing just a few feet away.

Well, I just want to apologize for treating you like my property. It was cruel. I’ve gotten just a little taste of it from the queen and I don’t like it at all.

“Thank you. Apology accepted.” There was a hint of a smile in the words. *I would like to be your friend, if you would have me,* thought Alice.

“I would like that very much, young Alice. I’ve never had a friend before,” said Rabbit, bright cheer evident in his voice.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

They arrived at the Imagisphere without a single bump. The pilot seemed torn between being pleased with himself and scared that he would have to fly again and risk his head.

The Imagisphere was massive and pastel green in color from a distance, growing more translucent as they approached. “Wow, it’s not a moon at all,” said Alice, her mind reeling.

“No,” said the queen, grinning, “Wonderland only has one moon, and it’s a boring hunk of rock. The Imagisphere is so much more, and just a bit larger as well.”

The duchess rolled her eyes and then jolted upright, looking startled. She watched the queen for a few moments and then seemed to relax again.

“Give me a good old-fashioned hunk of rock any day,” said Rabbit. “Landing on ground that I know really isn’t there makes my skin crawl. And passing through that horrid bubble of an atmosphere? Blech.”

They approached the massive green sphere at a sharp angle. It looked as solid as glass, but The White Rabbit didn’t slow down. When the collision was imminent, Alice closed her eyes and gripped her seat belt, certain they were all about to die. Instead, a strange tingle washed over her body, causing all of the hairs on her arms to stand on end. It was strange and not entirely unpleasant.

That wasn’t so bad, thought Alice.

“Not for you, there on the inside. Out here it’s a very different experience. Think of a normal atmosphere as a pool of clear water. When you dive in you pass through it cleanly and come up refreshed. This fake atmosphere is like diving into a fetid swamp with a thick layer of green slime over the top of the water. Disgusting.” The ship shuddered.

The queen gave a sharp glance at the pilot and he cringed, gripping the wheel tightly. “Just a bit of an air pocket, Your Majesty. I doubt it will happen again.”

“You’d better see that it doesn’t,” she hissed.

It didn't. Once the ship had passed through the green bubble of the atmosphere, a lush green expanse of rolling hills and valleys spread out before them. For all intents and purposes it looked like a planet of nothing but grass covered hills.

The White Rabbit set them down, or as close as he ever came to touching the ground anyway, next to what appeared to be a small house completely covered in red hearts. Even the shingles on the roof were shaped that way.

They disembarked and the queen led them over to the little house. One of the card guards opened the door to let them in. Inside was an array of racks with clothes and shoes on one wall and mallets and croquet balls on the other.

Alice found a rack full of clothes her size and selected a nice pair of dark blue pants, a light blue t-shirt, and a fitted gray cardigan. Once she'd selected them, a guard showed her to a dressing room. The queen and duchess were nowhere to be found, probably changing themselves.

A few minutes later they all stepped outside in their new clothes. Alice wondered briefly how the queen could have possibly gotten clothes in her size and stocked the house with them already. Then she remembered that they were in the Imagisphere and that everything in it was probably completely fake. Her face suddenly went ashen. "Laxana, are the clothes we're wearing made by this place?"

The duchess looked down at her, her brow pinched in confusion. "I don't think so, why?"

"Well, if they are and something goes wrong, won't we be..."

A look of recognition lit up her face. "Naked! Oh, dear, I hadn't thought about that. No, there's no way the queen would risk that. You can rest assured these clothes are one hundred percent real, then."

"Oh, good, do you think I might be able to take them with me? I don't have anything here in Wonderland other than my dress."

"I can't imagine why not," said Laxana. She turned to the queen and repeated Alice's question.

The queen smiled down at Alice, still looking regal in her simple skirt and blouse. "Of course you can keep the clothes, dear. Whatever would I do with such things?"

Alice opened her mouth to answer, but the queen had already walked away. She took a mallet from one of the card guards and took several practice swings. Two other guards stepped up and handed mallets to Alice

and Laxana. Alice took a couple of practice swings herself, trying to figure out how to swing without bumping into Snicker-snack.

Laxana looked from the queen to the guards, and then up into the sky. She leaned closer to Alice and whispered, “Don’t show her up.” Then she walked away and joined the queen.

Alice scowled at the pair of them, picked up her balls, and placed them near the starting line. Laxana’s words were clearly a warning, but Alice was tired of warnings. She just wanted to play a game and have a little fun. “Shall we begin?” she asked.

“Someone’s eager to show off her skills,” said the queen, arching an eyebrow.

“I just enjoy playing games. It’s not about showing off or competition.”

“Just make sure that you bring your best game, Alice. I don’t want to beat someone who isn’t trying. Where’s the fun in that?”

Alice grinned. “I will do my best.”

Laxana’s lips were pressed into a thin line and she gave Alice the smallest shake of her head. When the queen turned to regard her, she smiled brightly. “You know I always give it everything I have.”

“I know you do,” said the queen. “You’re the only person who ever gives me a run for my money.” She turned toward the little dressing house. “Let’s begin!”

The uniform green lawn transformed between one breath and the next. The hoops spread out to impossible distances and some of them were raised up on large hills, others dropped into valleys and disappeared. The mallets lit up with soft blue lights and the balls floated several centimeters into the air, glowing from within. Somehow, the sky dimmed to twilight. It seemed that every part of the Imagisphere could be changed.

While Alice marveled at the wonders of the Imagisphere, the queen stepped up and took the first shot. The ball zipped away silently on its cushion of air. The first hoop was so far way that it was hard to tell how well she’d done. Laxana took her shot, her mallet connecting with a resounding crack. It was obvious that the ball would travel much too far. Finally, it was Alice’s turn. She stepped up to her ball and lined up her shot. The mallet connected and the ball rocketed away to stop in the same vicinity as the queen’s.

When they arrived at the location of their balls, Alice found that her ball was resting in the grass, no longer glowing. Hers was the closest to the hoop

by at least three meters. "Something's wrong with my ball," she said.

The queen barely glanced at it. "It must have gone out of bounds. It should float again once you've run the first hoop."

Alice looked around and could see a faint blue glow in the grass about a meter away from her ball. It was plausible that it had gone out of bounds and been placed back inside according to standard rules. "Well, that will certainly make the first hoop much more challenging," she said with a smile.

"Quite," said the queen, a wicked grin on her face. "You're closest to the hoop Alice, so you shoot first."

Alice lined up her shot and judged the added strength she would need behind it in order to overcome the friction of the grass, and the large hill her ball had to climb. The crack her ball and mallet made rang out like a shot. Her ball rocketed up the hill and ricocheted off the inside of the hoop and went through. Alice let out an excited cheer as her ball once again floated into the air.

"Well played, Alice," said the queen, her voice flat.

"Thank you," said Alice, looking warily over at Laxana. The duchess simply watched with knitted brows.

The queen and Laxana both took their shots and cleared the first hoop as well. As soon as Laxana's ball passed under it, the landscape changed. The grass disappeared and was replaced with startlingly white sand. When Alice took a step to chase down her ball, both of her feet lifted off the ground. She floated slowly back to the ground. Alice wobbled on her feet and Laxana caught her by the hand.

"You need to move in a sort of gallop to get around when the gravity is like this," said the duchess. She released Alice's hand and demonstrated.

Alice imitated the moves and was able to follow behind her without too much trouble, sand flying about in her wake. "Is the landscape going to change with every hoop we clear?"

"Most likely. Every game is different. Literally anything could happen. Don't ask too many questions though. The queen delights in the surprises."

Besides the changing landscape and gravity, the surprises included: weather ranging from snow to torrential rain, their balls and mallets turning into hedgehogs and flamingos, balls that exploded after being hit enough times, and bats that swooped in and moved balls around the field. No matter the nature of the changes, they always managed to benefit the queen's

position in the game. Alice, despite the handicaps, stayed close behind her as they moved through the course. After the giant bats had stolen her ball and dropped it well out of bounds, Alice had had enough. "This is absolutely ridiculous," she groused.

"Come now, Alice, it's only a game," said the queen, her emerald eyes glinting in the newly returned daylight.

"That's easy for you to say. This whole thing is rigged to make it easier for you to win," retorted Alice. Laxana gasped and Alice bit back the rest of her remark, realizing her error, but it was too late.

The queen stepped close, her mouth turned up in a smile so sharp it could cut paper. There was no mistaking it for a warm gesture. "Are you accusing me of cheating, young lady?"

"No, Your Majesty," said Alice, turning her gaze to her feet. She laid her hand on Snicker-snack completely by accident and the sword sung out an unnecessary warning. The card guards were crowding the edge of the field in anticipation, stroking the hilts of their swords.

The queen studied Alice for an uncomfortable minute and the spark of mischief appeared in the depths of her green eyes. "Your shot," said the queen. "Make it a good one."

Alice wasn't sure if there was an implied threat in her last statement, but Alice heaved a sigh and lined up her shot as best she could. Her ball shot through the hoop and she held her breath, waiting for the next change in the atmosphere to present itself. Large bubbles drifted up from the ground, their surfaces shimmering with color. Alice smiled and let out her breath. That was a mistake. Her next breath in didn't provide any oxygen. Her lungs were full, but her body screamed in panic that she needed to take another breath. Alice clamped her hand on the hilt of her sword and it immediately warned her against obeying her body's need.

Laxana had come to stand in front of her, wringing her hands. She looked at the queen who stood off to the side, an amused grin on her face. Both of them had bubbles encircling their heads. It was all Alice could do to process the thought and make sense of it. Her mind shouted over and over at her to take a life-giving breath. The sword prodded her thinking when one of the large bubbles brushed against her face. Alice reached out to grab it, but it popped. Another floated a few steps away. Alice went for it as slowly and gently as her oxygen deprived body would allow. Her fingers pulled it toward her face without it popping. There was a tingling sensation as it

enveloped her head and she exhaled. Her breath in tasted like tangy citrus, but it provided the oxygen her lungs needed. She took several deep breaths and then glared at the queen.

“My dearest apologies, Alice.” Her apology was overly sweet and sympathetic. “The Imagisphere should have put the bubble on your head automatically. It still must have been configured for two players.” She threw up her hands in exasperation. “Technology!”

They finished the game without further incident. The queen won, as was to be expected, but she seemed to take no joy in it. Her trademark smile remained in place, but there was something going on behind her eyes that didn’t bode well for Alice.

CHAPTER TWELVE

There was palpable tension in The White Rabbit on the return ride to The Red Palace. Nobody said a word. The pilot was even sweatier than the first trip, but the trip was completely smooth.

The White Rabbit could obviously sense the tension as well. He didn't say anything until they were about to disembark. "Be careful, Alice. When the queen is in such a mood she tends to start ordering beheadings on a grand scale, and I'd very much like to fly with you again."

I will be, thank you my friend. I will fly with you again. We'll be the scourge of the Wonderland skies, thought Alice, chancing a tight smile that she wasn't sure The White Rabbit could actually see.

They marched back to the top floor of The Red Palace to a rousing cheer. Many people shouted their congratulations to the queen on her victory. She didn't seem any happier with the crowd cheering for her. Alice and Laxana followed behind her because it was obvious that was expected. The queen waded through the crowd, completely ignoring anyone that approached her until the man with the flapping jowls stepped in front of her, and a wicked smile spread across her face.

"Karl, I've reconsidered your offer," said the queen. "Alice would love to spend the evening in your company."

The man just stood there gaping for a few seconds and then he turned his covetous gaze to Alice. "When does my time with her begin, Your Majesty?"

"Immediately," she said, turning around to stare down the duchess, her eyes flashing, an obvious dare for her to object.

Alice looked up at Laxana as well, hoping she would speak up for her. Instead, the duchess simply lowered her gaze to the floor. There wasn't anyone who would save her from the creepy man in front of her. The whole reason she'd left on The White Rabbit was to have adventures where her parents couldn't tell her what she was supposed to be. Now she was in

Wonderland and the queen was doing just that. Simply running away wasn't an option this time. Her hand clenched the hilt of the sword.

Karl stepped up beside Alice, practically knocking the duchess out of the way in his eagerness. He wasn't fat like Alice had first thought, he simply had a lot of extra skin that sagged on his face. That combined with the heavily waxed mustache and the sneer curling his lip made for a truly unpleasant looking man. His left arm reached across his body to grip her arm possessively. His right hand pressed into the small of her back to push her forward. He didn't even bother to introduce himself. They were headed straight for the elevator.

The elevator loomed closer and Alice's gaze locked on the sash that crossed the man's chest. From a distance it had appeared to be a strange mottled fabric. Up close, it was clearly made of hair in varying shades. The man looked down at her hand and grinned. "I think I may have to pay extra to keep a more significant trophy this time. You really do have the most lovely hands." He stroked his free hand over the sash of hair. "Beautiful hands and blonde hair. Such a rare combination." He chortled. "And you can use a sword. What a delightful hunt this will be."

"Hunt?" gasped Alice. A warning from her mother sounded in the back of her head. *Never let them take you to another location.* Suddenly it was very important that she not get on that elevator. The vorpal sword sang its agreement, flooding her mind with various moves she could use to extricate herself from the situation. They were all unabashedly violent and the man hadn't really done anything wrong. She was probably working herself up over nothing. Still, she dug in her heels and pulled against his vice-like grip. He powered her forward without any trouble.

Alice looked around the room, hoping to lock gazes with anyone that would tell this man that what he was doing was inappropriate, that taking her somewhere against her will was wrong. Everyone she saw was watching, but only in furtive glances, many of them looking...envious. They didn't see anything wrong with what was happening. As a matter of fact they wished they were in Karl's place. The queen's guards ignored them entirely.

They reached the elevator and Karl used his left hand to punch the down button, his right still firmly gripping her side and pulling her against him. When his left hand came back from the button it didn't return to its previous grip, instead, his palm clamped over her mouth. He expected her to shout,

but Alice already knew that it wouldn't do her any good. He leaned down and whispered in her ear. "I'm going to enjoy watching the life die in those beautiful blue eyes."

The last piece of the terrible puzzle clicked into place. If she got in that elevator there would be no stopping this horrid man. He was going to hunt her down, kill her like an animal, and add a lock of her hair to his sash. She couldn't bring herself to imagine what his obsession with her hands was. Nobody was going to come to her rescue. Alice had to take action herself.

In her mind Alice kept hearing the queen shout "Off with his head," and the vorpal sword agreed. She wasn't quite up for that sort of thing. Alarm bells were screaming in her mind, so it made it hard to focus on finding a non-violent way out of this situation. There was nowhere to run. The elevator was approaching quickly. Level forty-nine, fifty, fifty-one...

The doors to the elevator popped open and Karl stepped toward them. Alice stood rooted firmly in place which took him by surprise and wrecked his balance, forcing him to either spin slightly toward her or stumble. Even in that moment where he nearly fell, his hand never left her mouth. She'd been counting on that. The sword slid from its scabbard with a strange vibrating ring. It arced in front of her with astonishing speed, though to Alice time seemed to slow. She watched the sword move through its arc from her left hip, angled directly toward Karl's left forearm. It passed through it as easily as a hot knife through butter. In her vision the spray of blood was so slow that it came out as individual drops that she could almost count. The hand finally left her mouth and dropped to the floor. His screams came to Alice as if from a long distance. She watched the hand flop to a rest at her feet with mild fascination while tiny drops of warm blood trailed down her arm.

The guards near the elevator stared in complete shock. Apparently they weren't used to anyone other than themselves spilling blood. Their hands hadn't even reached their swords by the time Alice stepped gingerly over Karl's severed limb and stepped into the elevator. She shook the blood from the vorpal sword with a quick flick of her wrist and sheathed it at her side. She pressed the button for the first floor.

As soon as her hand left the sword the pandemonium of the room she'd left washed over her. There were shouts of alarm and panic coming from the assembled crowd and the tramping of booted feet headed her way. Over it all came the sobbing wails of Karl, who had collapsed to the floor and was

clutching at the remainder of his left arm. Nobody payed him the least bit of attention. Every eye that Alice could see was trained on her. The elevator doors closed, muffling the chaos and she finished the motion to press the button for the ground floor.

The inside of the elevator doors were a shiny silver and gave Alice a decent look at herself. She looked a fright, with gore spattered over her clothes and skin. Her entire right hand was covered in red, as was the hilt of the sword. She expected to feel triumphant, having conquered someone who had been trying to hurt her. Instead, her whole body began to tremble. Not because she'd done something horrific. She wasn't at all sorry for what she'd done. She trembled because all she could imagine was what would have happened if she hadn't reacted in time and he had thought to take her sword. The silver walls of the elevator began to press in around her. She'd seen a fox hunt a couple of years ago. The frightened noises it made as it fled the hounds still haunted her. She could imagine herself in its place, the baying of the hounds closing in. Bile rose up in her throat and she emptied the fine meal she'd had in the corner of the elevator.

The elevator was nearing the bottom of the building, so she stood and tried to compose herself. It was hard to do through the sobs that wracked her body. Over and over she wished desperately that she would wake up, but nothing happened. A sharp pinch to her arm just made her wince. There was no waking up from this twisted nightmare. She would simply have to find a way to pull through it. By herself.

The elevator doors opened and she was greeted by a pack of men decorated like playing cards and wielding swords. That's when she remembered that she wasn't alone. She had a friend, and her name was Snicker-snack.

Two of the men lunged in after her, their swords held before them. She gripped the hilt of her sword and then hit the floor. Their swords passed over her in a whoosh of air and then collided with the back of the elevator, ringing it like a bell. Snicker-snack poured advice and strategy into her mind at blinding speed. A kick to each of the guards' kneecaps bought her the time she needed to roll to the side and draw the sword from its scabbard. The sword told her these men planned to kill her and that she should respond with the same level of ferocity. That wasn't a line she was ready to cross. Instead, she lashed out with two lightning fast strikes cutting their blades off a few inches above the hilt. The vorpal sword made a strange

sound as it cut through the swords. It wasn't exactly snicker-snack, but it was close. It made Alice smile. Whoever made the vorpal sword must have been a genius to design a blade that could talk to its user and cut through steel without hesitation, the kind of genius with a silly sense of humor.

The guards watched the dangerous parts of their swords fall to the elevator floor with a clang and then looked up to see Alice's smile. They turned and bolted from the elevator, practically knocking the guards behind them over. Alice followed them out.

When it suited her, she found she could keep the blade from cutting through their weapons. Mostly she didn't bother. It was only when she used the sword's special cutting ability that it made the delightful snicker-snack noise she loved so much.

Guards came at her from all sides, some waving swords and others the metal clubs that delivered agony with a soft touch. None of them ever found her skin. She danced through them like a ballerina, flicking her sword at a leg here, an arm there, parrying a guard's blade into his comrade's side. The card guards did their best to take her down, but they obviously weren't used to dealing with an enemy who fought back. They were so inept that she didn't feel the need to kill any of them for her safety. She disabled them as quickly as they came at her. They all bled, but she was certain none of them would die if their wounds were promptly treated. That bit of knowledge came from the sword as well, she thought. As she fought it became harder and harder to distinguish her thoughts from those the vorpal sword gave her.

The lobby was massive and Alice had fought her way all the way through it and to the exit in what felt like a blink of an eye. Behind her lay a bloody deck of cards, groaning and clutching at their wounds. Her sword arm felt like a lead weight as she slid the blade into its scabbard and bolted down the street.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The air outside The Red Palace was cool and crisp. There still wasn't even a glow of the sun on the horizon, but the street was still practically as bright as day, awash in neon lights. Either the neon didn't show the blood she was covered in very well, or the people on the street were so jaded or self-involved they didn't care that Alice looked like she'd been through a massacre.

After running a couple dozen blocks and turning whenever she ran into a red light, she stopped, wheezing and out of breath. There hadn't been any signs of a pursuit, but she needed to get off the street. There was no way they were just going to let her go after maiming one of the queen's friends and at least a dozen of her guards. She berated herself for not going to the docks and attempting a getaway on The White Rabbit. Some pirate she was, making her escape on foot instead of on a ship.

The street Alice found herself on was rather on the seedy side. There was trash everywhere and more than a few eyes peered at her from darkened corners and alleyways. Once she caught her breath she continued down the sidewalk, studying the signs on the buildings, looking for a place that she could get lost in for a few hours while she formulated a plan to get off this planet and back home.

Just ahead of her, perfectly lit in one of the few functional street lights, was the cat man she'd run into on her way to The Red Palace. He didn't say a word, just beckoned to her with one clawed finger and walked around the corner. He'd implied that he knew how to get a ship and get off Wonderland. Maybe now he'd give her some answers.

She jogged after him, not having the strength left to run. She rounded the corner in time to see him wave her onward and then step past a hulking man to enter a building.

Alice approached the massive wall of flesh warily, looking up at the glowing sign above the door. It proclaimed that the place was called Tea Time. When she looked back down she blinked and shook her head. She

was seeing double. Maybe she'd hit her head when she'd fought her way out of The Red Palace. No amount of shaking and blinking cleared the second giant from her vision. She was forced to concede that the largest man she'd ever seen was actually two identical men wearing identical outfits. They blinked down at her from under heavy brows. Every inch of them was covered in rippling muscle, barely contained by their black dress pants and red t-shirts labeled "Staff" in large white letters across the chest. They would have been the most intimidating men she'd ever seen if they hadn't both been grinning down at her with such innocence.

"Street like this is no place for little girls," said the goon on the left.

"Right, Dum," said the goon on the right, nodding vigorously. "But she does have pretty hair."

"What has that got to do with anything, Dee?" asked Dum.

"Ain't got nothing to do with anything but her hair," said Dee, his eyebrows bunching. "Why you asking silly questions?"

"It isn't a silly question just because you don't understand it," said Dum with a sigh.

Alice couldn't see any end to their conversation in sight, so she cleared her throat. "Did a man looking very much like a cat just go in here?"

"Oh, that's Cheshire," said the goon on the right, who she was pretty sure was Dee. They were still impossible to tell apart.

"You didn't exactly answer her question, Dee," said Dum, shaking his head. "Yes, Cheshire did just go inside. He's been banned a dozen times, but hell if I know how to keep him out when he doesn't seem to need a door to get in."

"That's just what I said, Dum. Don't make out like I'm stupid," said Dee petulantly, his lower lip protruding.

"I never said you were stupid Dee, and never will," said Dum, patting his brother on the shoulder. "You'd kick my ass if I did."

"Damn right, I'm a helluva fighter," said Dee, his face lighting up with a grin. He patted his bulging biceps and then flexed, making them pop up even further.

"Well, if he's in there, I might as well go in and have a chat with him," said Alice, pulling the handle on the red, metal door between them. A cloud of sweet smoke and a thumping bass beat poured out into the night air.

"Good luck," said Dum. "If he doesn't want to be found you won't find him, so you better hope he's in a chatty mood."

“And young miss?” said Dee.

“Alice, my name is Alice.”

“And young Alice, if you need help, just give a shout and we’ll come runnin’. There’s some unsavory characters in there.”

She hadn’t heard the loud music until she opened the door. There was no way they would ever hear her from inside, no matter how hard she screamed. There didn’t seem to be much of a point in arguing, so she simply nodded and said, “Thank you, Dee.”

As she stepped inside and the door closed behind her, she heard Dee say, “Hey, how’d she know my name? I never told ‘er.”

Inside, Tea Time was dark and smelled strongly of the sweet smoke Absolem the caterpillar had been blowing at her. There was a bar to the right, crowded with patrons. The dance floor was a raised area straight ahead. Off to the left were tables on various levels, most of them had a hookah in the center and a group of people huddled around them. Cheshire was nowhere to be seen, so Alice wandered over toward the table area and took a seat.

A woman in very tiny black shorts and a white tank top strutted over to her table, a notepad and pen in her hands. It was hard to tell in the dim lighting, but it appeared that her skin was actually light blue, and her hair was stark white, putting off a slight glow from a black light somewhere above. She held an empty tray in front of her with both hands. Alice blinked. A notepad and pen in two hands, and a tray held by two more. The woman had four arms.

“Welcome to Tea Time,” said the waitress, grinning down at Alice. She flipped the tray in her lower arms, and then, with an exaggerated flourish, touched her pen to the notepad. “What can I get for you?”

While she waited for a response, the woman idly flipped her empty tray with her lower set of arms and watched Alice with an amused smile. Alice watched the arms with rapt attention, tracing them back up to her torso. They met her body at about the level of her breasts. There was an additional set of holes in her tank top to accommodate them.

“Ahem,” said the woman, and Alice blushed, realizing she’d been staring for quite some time. “Since my boobs aren’t anything special, I’m assuming you’re staring at my arms.”

“I’m sorry,” said Alice, “I didn’t mean to. I’ve just never seen...”

“Don’t worry about it honey, it happens all the time. They’re just arms like yours. See?” She held out an arm for Alice to look at closer. “I just have an extra set. It makes this job quite a bit easier.”

“I bet it does,” said Alice, smiling. She pulled her gaze away from the woman’s arms and back up to her eyes. “I bet a lot of things are easier with four hands.”

“You bet, honey,” said the waitress, giving Alice a wink. “Now, what can I get you?”

“Oh, nothing thanks, I was just here trying to find a friend that came in a bit ago. He doesn’t seem to be around though.”

“Well, you’re cute and all, but that’s against the rules. You have to buy something or you can’t sit in here. You’re welcome to wait outside for your friend, but if you want to wait in here you have to buy at least a little something.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t have any money. My friend is already inside, I just haven’t been able to find him yet.” Alice scanned the room, but still didn’t see any signs of Cheshire.

“I wish I could make an exception, honey, but you’ll have to wait outside for your friend. What’s he look like? If I see him, I’ll tell him you’re outside.”

She couldn’t risk waiting outside for long, but maybe the waitress would spot him soon. “Alright, his name’s Cheshire. He’s about my height, with gray fur. His head looks like an ordinary cat, but he tends to grin a lot—”

“He’s a grinning fool, our Cheshire Cat,” came a booming man’s voice from behind her. “And any friend of Cheshire’s is a friend of ours. We’ll put anything she wants on our tab, Violet.”

“Very well, Seamus,” said the waitress with a smile and a nod. “What will you have, dear?”

Alice turned and found a man standing behind her in the brightest orange suit she’d ever seen. His skin looked black in the dim lighting and his eyes were the lightest brown she’d ever seen, almost yellow. On his head was a dark purple, oversized top hat. A bright yellow scarf was wrapped around it and trailed down his back. His wide smile showed teeth that were straight and such a bright white they glowed in the black light. All of the crazy color mixing should have made him look ridiculous, but somehow he pulled it off.

“Um, I don’t really know what to have, I’ve never been to Wonderland before,” she said, more to Seamus than to the waitress.

“Well, let’s get her a spot of Tea then, Violet. You can’t come to Wonderland and not have some Tea.” He gestured for Alice to follow him, and handed her a handkerchief and a small mirror he pulled out of his pocket. “You may wish to clean yourself off a bit. You look positively a fright with that blood on your face.”

Alice looked in the mirror and gasped. Her escape had splashed so much blood on her face that her skin appeared to be a dark red color except for a few splotches of white around her nose. That put her conversation with the bouncers at the door and the waitress into a whole new light. There was something really off about a world where nobody commented on a girl covered in blood. The man in the top hat had at least given her something to clean up with if he hadn’t asked her if she was hurt. She did her best to clean herself off with a little spit and the handkerchief as she followed him to his table. If the man and his friends tried to hurt her, she still had Snicker-snack at her side and a promise from Dee and Dum to come to her rescue.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Please do have a seat,” said Seamus, his blinding white grin still in place. He took a seat at the head of a large table along one of the walls of Tea Time.

The table was more dimly lit than the already poor lighting in the rest of the place. There was a small shape moving on the table near a tea kettle, and a couple of other small figures in chairs. Alice eyed the figure behind the tea kettle warily. She was fairly certain she saw a small body and a long tail. “Is that a mouse on the table?”

“Ugh, why do people always think that?” said a small voice. “I’m a dormouse.” The small shape scurried forward to the edge of the table where it gripped its tail and held it forward. “See all the beautiful fur on the tail? So much prettier than those ugly naked things on my cousins.”

Not only did the dormouse have fur on its tail, it wore a full outfit befitting a pirate, from a doublet and a white shirt, to the pointed hat and tiny sword belted across her back. It wasn’t the usual pirate way to wear a sword, but it made sense with her need to run on all fours. While there wasn’t much to distinguish her sex in her looks, her voice was decidedly feminine.

“My apologies, I couldn’t see you well back there in the dark. You’re clearly a dormouse,” said Alice, offering her finger to the small creature by way of a handshake. “I’m Alice.”

“Oh, yes, I forget you humans have terrible night vision compared to us dormice. Apology accepted.” She took Alice’s finger in her paws and shook it quite vigorously for a creature so small. “I’m Lyla.”

“Nice to meet you, Lyla.”

“Likewise,” said the dormouse, scurrying back to her spot near the kettle.

Now that she knew what she was looking for, Alice could see a dormouse sized table and chair sitting near the kettle with a tiny tea set sitting on it. It really said something about the state of her life at the moment that meeting a talking dormouse didn’t really surprise her. Seamus watched her with an

amused expression and something resembling recognition in his eyes, which was strange because Alice was quite certain she would have remembered meeting a character such as him before.

“Alice, is it?” said Seamus, taking off his hat and inclining his head. “A pleasure to see you again, my dear.”

Alice frowned. “But we’ve never met before.”

“Which is why I didn’t say a pleasure to meet you again,” said Seamus. “As you heard Violet say, my name is Seamus, though most people tend to know me better as the Mad Hatter.”

It seemed silly to argue with someone who just identified himself as mad, but Alice couldn’t help herself. “Unless you were at the queen’s party tonight, I highly doubt you’ve seen me before.” She immediately regretted having said that. She looked over her shoulder, expecting to see card guards pouring in through the heavy metal door that Dee and Dum guarded.

“Oh, dear Alice, I must beg your pardon, I’m being rather unintentionally obscure again. I’ve never looked upon you with my eyes, but I have seen you in my Sight.” Seamus closed his eyes, bowed his head and placed two dark fingers to his temple.

“Are you trying to tell me that you’re psychic, and that you’ve seen me in your psychic visions?” asked Alice, a smile coming to her face at finding that she could still be surprised after all.

“To be perfectly plain and boring about it, yes,” said Seamus, opening his strange amber eyes and fixing her with his gaze.

Everything he was saying seemed to be plainly mad, and his almost glowing eyes were unnerving, but he really didn’t seem to be out of his mind. Alice decided to go ahead and take a seat at the table across from what increasingly looked like a pair of rabbit ears. “Well, thank you for being plain and boring. It’s hard to get a straight answer around here from anyone.”

“Yes, Wonderland is decidedly crooked,” said the ears across the table, and then they giggled a small electronic sounding giggle.

“Don’t mind March, he delights in puns,” said Seamus. “Stand up and meet our guest, March.”

A small head popped up beneath the rabbit ears. They weren’t typical rabbit ears by any stretch of the imagination. They were a shiny silver color, perhaps made of metal, though they did bend and flex as their owner cocked his head and then hopped across the table to greet Alice. The rest of the

rabbit looked normal, if a large talking rabbit could be considered normal. His fur was the standard brown of the rabbits that Alice often saw running through the field around her house. He didn't wear pants or a shirt, but he did have on a jacket and tie. "Hello, Alice, as Seamus said, my name is March. And before you start calling rabbit, I'm a hare. The longer feet give it away." He thumped one of his large feet heavily on the table causing everything on it to rattle.

"Pleased to meet you Mister March Hare," said Alice.

"Yes, I'm quite sure you are," said March, giving her a hare's version of a grin. His voice was small and had a hint of an electronic trill to it.

"If I'm being rude," said Alice, "I apologize, but are you an electronic hare?"

"No," said March, shaking his head, "Electronic implies that someone created me from scratch. I was born to a mother just like you and Seamus were. I was in an accident when I was just a wee lad. One of the queen's drivers ran me down in the street while she was in the car. They didn't so much as hit the brakes. If it weren't for old Seamus here, I'd have been just another bit of roadkill on the streets of Wonderland."

Instead, I got these shiny new synthetic ears and more than a few titanium bones and other electronic bits inside me. The result is that I'm faster and stronger than I ever was before. So, that makes me a bionic hare, rather than an electronic one."

"Oh, you are too kind to me March," said Seamus, placing a hand over his heart. "I only did what any decent inventor and engineer would do in the circumstances. You needed a few new parts to live and I had a few parts to give."

"Decent my fluffy tail," replied March, shaking a fist at the hatter. Seamus looked politely embarrassed. It seemed almost like a practiced expression, as if they'd had this same conversation a hundred times before. "You're a bloody genius and you full well know it. Why else would the queen have commissioned you to make a sword?"

"You made a sword for the queen?" asked Alice, her hand automatically going to the hilt of Snicker-snack.

"No," said Seamus, a wicked grin spreading across his face. "I made a sword in her employ. The sword itself was made for someone else entirely. Someone quite special. The queen should have been more specific when she gave her orders to me."

"So, you did make a sword, that the queen paid you for?" asked Alice, one brow raised.

"Yes," said Seamus simply.

"But, it wasn't for her?"

"Exactly," said Seamus. "I'd never make something for that evil hag, especially after what she did to poor March here."

"I don't quite follow," said Alice, frowning. She'd learned not to argue directly with the people in Wonderland about what did and didn't make sense. It was easier just to ask questions. "How did you make a sword that wasn't for her?"

"That my dear is quite a complex question that would take me days to explain technically to someone who has no knowledge of nanotechnology," said Seamus, nibbling on a cracker and taking a sip of his Tea.

"How about non-technically?" asked Alice.

"Oh, that's quite simple then. I gave her quite an outrageously picky attitude."

Alice looked at Seamus skeptically. Swords didn't have attitudes, picky or otherwise. Everyone in Wonderland was most certainly mad. It was at that point that she realized that the sword was singing to her in the sweetest way. There were no words or instructions, just a steady stream of admiration and love. Alice smiled slightly and thought a question in the direction of the sword, and it responded very positively, so she rephrased the question and asked the hatter. "Did this sword you made have a name?"

The hatter clapped and tilted his head back, letting go a laugh of unfettered glee. "Oh yes, of course she did, all good swords should have a name and she is the best of swords, so I gave her the best of names."

Alice nodded and gripped the sword tightly, it responded by urging her to continue. "What is her name?"

Again, a cackle from the hatter, worthy of a straitjacket. He waved his right arm back and forth in a decisive slashing movement. "Snicker-snack!" he chortled.

"I knew it!" shouted Alice. "That's what she was trying to tell me. She was trying to tell me that you made her."

"Oh dear, I guess Wonderland has claimed another for the mad house," said Seamus, bringing his hand up to bite his knuckle. "I do hope that Violet comes around with the Tea soon, it really does help."

"I'm not mad," hissed Alice, her excitement at having found the sword's maker momentarily forgotten.

"Oh, it takes one to know one my dear, and if you think you saw the vorpal sword, you are truly barking. The queen keeps it locked up in her most secure vault. I doubt even Cheshire could get in there to catch a glimpse of it."

"That's a bunch of dog crap and you know it, Hatter!" called a distinctly feline voice from somewhere to Alice's left. She'd been antagonized by it enough to know it was the Cheshire Cat. "I can steal anything, from anywhere!"

Seamus took a sip of his Tea ignoring the apparently invisible cat, and then, looked down at it as if he had just noticed it was there. He slid the cup and saucer over to Alice. "Here, drink it, it will help keep the madness at bay. I've had quite a bit already this evening."

"I am most certainly not mad!" shouted Alice. She reached down to her side and yanked Snicker-snack from her scabbard. She expected the sword to bang into the table with a loud clatter that would suit her mood. Instead, it sliced right through the table without the slightest resistance. Everyone stood there and gaped until the clatter of the kettle falling in half broke the silence.

"Well, if you're not mad, why did you cut the bloody table and kettle in half?" prodded Lyla the dormouse in an irate squeak.

"Oh, Alice, she finally found you," exclaimed the hatter, a look of pure elation on his face. He barely spared a glance for the table which was now bowing in the center as a result of the cut. His full attention was on the sword. "It's so good to see her again. Might I touch her so that I can hear her sing?"

Despite her protests, hearing a sword sing and talk in her head had started to make her question her sanity. To hear Seamus ask to hear her sing came as quite a relief. "Of course you may, Seamus. You made her after all," said Alice.

Seamus stood up and stepped gingerly around the table. "Careful now Alice. Our girl here could cut any one of us in half as easily as that table. The key is your intent. If you don't wish to do me harm, the sword won't, but she's not terribly subtle. Even the slightest bit of resentment or fear could make her quite a nasty little biter."

"But I didn't intend to cut the table or the kettle," argued Alice.

"No, I don't suppose that you did." Seamus grinned and his bright amber eyes glinted and he raised a finger in the air. "But you were annoyed and probably wanted to cause a ruckus, didn't you?"

Alice nodded reluctantly. "I was being a bit of a child, wasn't I?"

"Oh, don't fret over that," said Seamus stepping up close to Alice, his brilliant eyes smiling. "I can be quite a child myself from time to time. The important lesson here is that while you hold the sword, you must be very careful of your emotions. You could do great harm before you realize what it is you've done."

Alice lowered the tip of the sword carefully, trying to keep her thoughts as calm and collected as possible. These people and animals seemed to be friendly enough. They'd let her stay inside Tea Time and out of the queen's clutches. Maybe they would even help her figure out how to get to The White Rabbit.

The sword came into contact with the surface of the table and this time it rested there without cutting through the wood. Seamus nodded encouragingly and held out his hand. Alice passed the hilt of the sword over to him gently and sighed when the song of the sword left her mind.

"Ahhh," cooed Seamus, his eyes drooping closed. "It's been a long time my friend. I'm so glad you found the one I made you for."

"But, we only just met," said Alice. "As a matter of fact, I think you may have made the sword before I was even born." She looked up at the hatter and waited for him to start spouting madness again.

"True enough on both accounts, but neither fact does anything to contradict what I said." The hatter's eyes flicked open. They were fogged over, leaving them almost entirely white. "This sword as I designed it can only be wielded by one person. A singular being who is meant to accomplish much in her lifetime. She will bring peace and dignity back to Wonderland and Snicker-snack will dance at her side. She will smite the wicked and inspire nobility in those whose lives she touches. And as I can see now, her name shall be Alice."

The March Hare finally seemed to rouse from his reverie and stared over at Alice. "Wait, Seamus. Are you saying this little slip of a girl is the one you designed the vorpal sword for all those years ago?"

"I am, indeed," said Seamus, his eyes returning to their usual unsettling shade.

"So she will slay the Jabberwock?" asked Lyla, peeking from behind the remnants of the tea kettle.

"And any who stand in her way," agreed Seamus.

"Well, then," said Lyla, drawing her tiny sword and holding it in the air. "Let me be the first to pledge my sword to help you in any way that I can. That foul Jabberwock burned the tree that my family was in. If I weren't out foraging at the time I would have gone with them. I curse the powers that be every day for that cruelty, and then thank them for being given the opportunity to avenge my family."

"Aww, you poor thing," said Alice, looking down at Lyla.

"Don't you dare pity me because I'm 'small and cute'. I'm a warrior like the rest of my family was and I'll cut out your pretty eyes and use them as decoration."

It didn't seem the right time for Alice to argue that she only felt sorry because a fellow creature had lost their family, so she just said, "Duly noted."

"Hmmpf," said the dormouse, nodding emphatically.

Alice couldn't be sure, but it seemed to be a nod of approval. "I'd be glad to have you fighting at my side."

"Oh-ho-ho, and fight you do, Alice," said Seamus, eyeing the vorpal sword. "Snicker-snack was just explaining to me that you enjoy cutting hands off. She quite enjoys it herself."

"I don't enjoy cutting hands off," said Alice, the bright spray of scarlet gushing from Karl's stump flashing before her eyes.

"Well, then whatever did you do it for?" asked Seamus, just then injecting a tone of disapproval, as if cutting hands off were a perfectly fine hobby, but a deplorable thing to do if you weren't enjoying it.

"He was trying to take me somewhere," said Alice, her body shivering involuntarily.

"Note to self," said the hatter seriously. "Avoid taking Alice places unless you want to lose a hand."

"No, no, no," said Alice, sighing with frustration. "He was trying to abduct me. I think he meant to hunt me..." she said, avoiding the glances of the two non-humans at the table. "Like an animal."

"The scoundrel!" shouted all three of the visible people at the table and Cheshire from somewhere toward the other end.

"He's lucky you only took his hand," added Lyla. "I'd have used a more final form of retribution, if you know what I mean." She drew a line across her throat with one tiny claw.

Alice smiled, glad to hear that not everyone in Wonderland thought what he'd planned to do was acceptable. "Thank you, Lyla, and the rest of you as well."

"Every living thing deserves to live the life it was given," said Seamus. He gently handed the sword back to her. "Snicker-snack told quite a story about your escape. The two of you together are truly magnificent. What are your plans now?"

"Well, I'm not really sure what to do. I'm sure the queen is still looking for me. She doesn't seem to be the type to give up something that she believes is hers." Alice sheathed the sword and took a seat at the table. It groaned loudly when she leaned her elbows on it. "What I want to do is meet up with The White Rabbit and see if he'll give escaping with me a try."

"White Rabbit?" asked March, one of his bionic ears perking up.

"Oh, that's right, I haven't told you all much of anything about my adventures," said Alice.

So, Alice recounted her tale from her parents sending her to bed, all the way up to meeting Seamus. When it was said all together it sounded completely mad. The hatter, the hare, the dormouse, and she assumed the Cheshire cat, listened with rapt attention, gasping and jeering in just the right places during the story. Lyla seemed particularly impressed with her escape from The Red Palace and reaffirmed her wish to put up her sword next to Snicker-snack and battle to the bloody end. The more the dormouse spoke with no one scoffing, the more Alice believed she might actually be as fierce as she claimed.

"This White Rabbit sounds like quite a noble creature, so I approve of you giving him a name relating to my short-legged cousins," said March. "I should love to meet him some day. Too bad that's impossible."

"Impossible?" asked Alice.

"Oh yes," said March sipping his Tea. "The Red Palace is an impenetrable fortress. I don't see you just marching in there and getting your friend the ship to fly away with you. You could wait for him to go on one of his excursions like the one where he picked you up, but who knows when that will be and the queen would probably find you by then. So, I don't see any way we're going to ever get to meet him."

"Impossible?" asked Seamus. "Impossible is my favorite flavor. People said that a sword that could cut through anything and be smarter than its user was impossible, but there she sits on our young friend's hip."

"Right," piped in Lyla. "I say we storm the place and give the bloody queen of hearts and her lackeys what they deserve. If we're lucky, she'll put out the Jabberwock and I'll get to take my revenge."

"You keep talking about this Jabberwock," said Alice, looking down at the dormouse. "What is it exactly?"

"It's a hideous beast," responded Seamus. "Covered in scales and horns, it breathes fire, and its roar is a shrill psychic attack that drives people insane. It's the most horrible creature ever to exist and it answers only to the queen. Nobody knows how she controls it."

"If it doesn't kill you, it leaves you mad as a...um, hatter," said March. "Pardon the expression, Seamus.

"Don't worry about it," said Seamus. "It's not like I'm really a hatter anyway. They just started calling me that because of my sense of style once I went round the bend." He tipped his oversized top hat and grinned.

"Besides, it was that beast that drove me to it."

"The longer I'm here," said Alice, "the less I think that any of you are truly mad."

"You're probably being affected by the Jabberwock already. I'm sure if you have some Tea, you'll be back to thinking us all off our rockers in no time," said Seamus, pouring some more Tea into the cup in front of her. At some point Violet must have dropped some more off because there was a new steaming pot next to him.

"Oh fine," said Alice, gingerly taking a sip of the piping hot Tea. "If it will make you feel better, I'll drink the stuff."

"The point is that it will make *you* feel better," said March.

Alice took another sip of the Tea and smiled. It really was quite pleasant to drink. It had a rich earthy flavor with just a hint of mint and it warmed her stomach nicely. "Well, it tastes nice, but I don't feel a bit different."

"Give it a moment," said Seamus.

All three of her companions watched her expectantly. Alice was surprised to find that she thought of them as friends already. Things happened so quickly in Wonderland, it was hard to believe that anyone lived beyond the age of ten. She'd only been there the span of a day and already she felt as if she were nearly a hundred years old.

The warmth of the Tea suffused her body, making her fingers and toes tingle. It was rather a pleasant feeling. Then her problems loomed large in her mind, threatening to overwhelm her. There were so many. She was trapped in Wonderland. Her only means of escape was locked inside The Red Palace. She was being chased by the queen of Wonderland who most likely wanted to take off her head, and lastly, she was starting to miss her parents. For a moment she felt cold dread at having to face those dilemmas. Alice was only a small girl after all. How could she ever hope to do anything to help herself?

Then, like magic, her problems began to shrink. One by one they got smaller and smaller in her head until they only occupied the tiniest corner of her mind. All that mattered was that she was sitting with friends and having a pleasant cup of Tea. They may be barking mad, but they were her friends. A slow smile crept across her face.

"There," said Seamus, nodding. "That's it."

March smiled and went back to drinking his own Tea. "Much better," he said, though it wasn't clear if he was talking to himself or Alice.

Alice nodded anyway and took another sip of her Tea. This time the effects were much more immediate. It seemed as if everything in the world were being shoved through a keyhole. It twisted and pulled at Alice, threatening to pull her in.

Her companions didn't seem to notice anything. They just chatted idly and drank their Tea. Alice's insides began to writhe and she grasped at her stomach, but her hands were entirely too small for the task. Seamus' voice grew impossibly loud and Lyla's started to deepen into a husky human female register.

All at once the world dimmed and began to spin. Alice had read plenty of descriptions of the feeling before. She was passing out. It wouldn't be long before everything would go black and then she wouldn't have any thoughts until she came around again.

The table fell away above Alice, as she expected, though she didn't feel a sensation of falling. Her insides finally righted themselves, but there wasn't anyone around. In front of her was only a large screen of cloth. When she looked up all she could see was darkness. A sudden breeze drifted through the space, chilling her backside. Alice reached back to pull up her pants and found that she wasn't wearing any. In fact, she was completely naked.

Her cheeks burned red. She instantly crossed one arm over her chest and squatted down to try and hide her lower half. She scuttled over to the cloth screen as quickly as she could, hoping no one would see her. That didn't seem to be a problem though, as she was completely alone in the strange cloth room. In the darkness above she could hear rumbling that sounded vaguely familiar, almost like voices, but they were impossibly deep and loud.

Then one voice called out in a normal pitch, "Banzaaaaaaiii!" And the cloth room shook around her.

"Hello," called Alice, pulling the light blue fabric as best she could around her naked body.

"Alice?" called a husky feminine voice. "Are you down here?"

Alice debated not saying anything because she didn't want someone to find her naked. Then it occurred to her that whoever it was, knew her name, and at least they were a woman. "Yes, I'm over here," she shouted.

Fabric rustled, then a large hairy beast toppled over one of the fabric walls opposite her. It had a long furry tail and was wearing clothes. There was a sword strapped to its back. As soon as the beast looked up at her, Alice recognized her. "Lyla! You've gotten so large!"

"Not quite, Alice," said Lyla, standing up on her hind legs. She wore an expression that was hard to interpret; possibly a strange mix of concern and amusement. "Don't you recognize the fabric you've got yourself wrapped up in?"

Alice looked down at the light blue material and tried to place it. It wasn't until she saw a splotch of reddish brown that she understood. She was naked because her shirt was the massive pile of fabric laying around her like walls. Lyla hadn't gotten larger; Alice had gotten smaller. "I've shrunk!"

"Indeed you have," said Lyla. "You're probably just about my size now, which is quite a nice size to be if you ask me."

"It most certainly is not," groused Alice, and then immediately regretted it when Lyla's ears sagged. "I'm sorry Lyla. I didn't mean that it was a bad size to be. It's just that--"

"Hush child," hissed Lyla.

"No, really, I didn't mean--"

"Hush," growled Lyla, baring her four sharp front teeth.

Alice jumped and then stepped back into the fabric of her shirt, trying to hide. "Sorry," she whimpered.

Lyla stepped closer and Alice shrunk further back. "Don't be scared," whispered the dormouse. "I wasn't angry at you. Can't you hear the commotion up there?"

Alice tilted her head up, listening intently. The rumbling that she recognized as speech by the full sized people had intensified and there were loud metallic sounds. If she mentally adjusted the sounds down to a smaller size, she imagined them to be the ringing of drawn swords. The voices were angry shouts. "Is someone fighting?" asked Alice.

"Only with words," said Lyla, climbing back up the pile of fabric, her head tilted to the side. "Quiet now, so I can listen."

The sounds intensified and Lyla drew her sword. "If I go up there, you stay put."

Alice nodded and pulled her shirt closer. There wasn't anything she could do at her current size. Even her sword wouldn't be any help, now being many times larger than she was. She could imagine the palace guards roughing up March and Seamus. If they were taken by the guards, she had no idea what she would do.

Lyla climbed down from the fabric wall and heaved a great sigh. She licked her paws and then flicked them over her ears in a nervous gesture. "That was close. I think you owe your life to Cheshire."

"What happened?" asked Alice.

"The card guard showed up looking for you. They knew you were here and that they were charged with bringing you to the palace to face the queen's judgment. They looked all around and couldn't find you. I think Cheshire must have hidden the vorpal sword because it's not on the floor any more. If they had found it, you would have been sunk."

"Are they gone now?" asked Alice, peering up into the black space above and still not able to see anything other than the underside of the table.

"Yes, they stormed off, threatening to behead anyone who gave you aid," said Lyla in her normal speaking voice, which was quite beautiful to Alice's small ears.

"What do we do now?" asked Alice. "I can't just stay here hiding in a pile of my clothes. They'll eventually come back if they can't find me elsewhere."

Lyla nodded. "True enough, and while my size is nice for me, I don't think you'll be very effective without some good strong paws and my agility. We need to get you back to your original size."

"How did I end up small in the first place?"

"Must have been the Tea. Guess you weren't mad after all. It's supposed to shrink your mental problems so that they're more manageable. I guess it just shrunk all of you instead."

"I kept trying to tell you all that I wasn't mad," groaned Alice. "But nobody would believe me."

"Well, one of the classic signs of being mad is that you generally don't know you are to begin with. Everyone here tends to just assume they're at least a little bit mad because of the Jabberwock."

"So what do I do about this shrinking business?" asked Alice.

"First, I'll go grab some spare clothes from my bag up on the table. You can't get anywhere if you're going to cower behind your enormous shirt."

She said it with such a sweet, mothering tone that it made Alice smile.
"Thank you."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Alice stood on the top of the table, looking down at her new outfit. Lyla had a shirt and vest that fit her quite well, and since she didn't wear pants, they'd been able to make a simple skirt out of a bit of her old shirt.

Seamus and March looked down at her and fretted. "We didn't know that could happen," they said repeatedly.

"It's fine," said Alice, realizing that she truly believed it. "We'll figure this out, or find someone who can."

"Yes!" exclaimed Seamus, pointing a finger up into the air. "I know just the one to figure this out."

"Great," said Alice, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "Who is it? How can we find them and get me big again?"

"You've already met him," said Seamus. "Absolem is the one who imports the stuff they make the Tea out of. He probably knows more about it than anyone in Wonderland. He'll know what to do about this."

"Oh yes," said March. "Absolem will know just the thing. There is one small problem though."

"Payment," said Lyla with a sigh. "That caterpillar is the greediest bugger in Wonderland next to the queen."

"The only thing I have of value is the vorpal sword," said Alice.

The sword had appeared on the table by the time Alice had made it up there, clutching to Lyla's back. Seamus had offered to pick her up, but she'd been too afraid of getting smashed between his fingers.

"Oh, no," said Seamus. "You can't give up the sword. You're going to need it to storm the palace."

"Well, I can't very well storm the palace with a sword that's ten times my size, now can I?" sniped Alice, crossing her arms in front of her.

"Point for the girl who's not insane," said Lyla.

"I'm about as penniless as they come," said March.

"Me as well," said Seamus with a sigh. "I'm afraid they may toss me out on my ear any time I try to get them to add something to my tab here."

"What about you, Lyla?" asked Alice. "Do you have any money I could borrow to pay the caterpillar?"

"Never had much use for money," said Lyla. She licked up a drop of Tea that was on the edge of a saucer. It wouldn't have been more than a speck to Alice when she was her normal size. To her now, it was a good sized drink. "Being this small has many advantages."

"Well, he gave me something for free once already," said Alice, remembering the worthless bit of mushroom in her dress pocket. "Maybe he'll do it again."

All three of her companions gasped. It was strange listening to Seamus and March talk with their booming voices, but she was slowly growing accustomed to it. "What's wrong?" asked Alice.

"Didn't you hear us about how Absolem is greedy?" asked March.

"He never gives anything for free," said Seamus. "Not even to his own mother."

"Well, it was just a measly old mushroom," said Alice, still not sure what the big deal was. Everyone did something nice for someone else every now and then, didn't they?

"What did he say when he gave it to you?" asked Lyla, gripping Alice by the shoulders.

The intensity in her gaze made Alice's stomach drop. "I'm not sure..."

"Think child," said Lyla, still staring intensely. "If you owe him something and go back there without paying, it would be worse than if you handed yourself over to the queen."

Alice thought back to her conversation with the caterpillar. He hadn't been very helpful at all, mostly talking in circles. Somehow she'd managed to get out of him to check at the palace docks for The White Rabbit. "He said something about how the first one's always free..."

"Well, that'd be the first time I've ever heard him say anything of the sort," said Lyla, relaxing her grip and stepping away. She breathed a small sigh of relief. "At least it sounds like you're not in trouble with him."

"Did he say anything else about this mushroom?" asked Seamus, a curious glint in his eye.

"You know, I think he did," said Alice, rolling her eyes up and to the right. It always seemed to help her think. "He said something about it making me feel, um..." It was right on the tip of her tongue. She tapped her

chin with a finger while her friends stared at her as if she were deciding the fate of the world. "He said it would make me feel ten feet tall!"

"Oh, that's quite interesting indeed," said Seamus, apparently missing the point.

"But what if it doesn't just make me feel ten feet tall, but could actually make me grow again?" asked Alice, helping him along her train of thought.

"That sounds impossible," said the hatter. "We absolutely must give it a try!"

Alice turned to Lyla. "The mushroom is in the pocket of my dress..." She trailed off, her chin dropping to her chest.

"You weren't wearing a dress," said Lyla, looking confused.

"I was when I was in the Imagisphere," said Alice, her tone desolate. "I changed my clothes there, but I didn't put the mushroom in my pants."

"Well, it looks like we're back where we started then," said March.

"Where is that?" said Seamus, still seeming a bit confused.

Alice glared at him and he looked so abashed that she immediately regretted it.

"I'm sorry Alice, I was just pondering the possible scientific uses for these new effects of Tea and this mushroom you are talking about. It's quite fascinating." Seamus shook his head rapidly, knocking his top hat askew.

"There, shook it off. So, I guess we have to get you over to Absolem, then."

"And figure out some form of payment," said Alice glumly.

"Absolem will take some strange things as payment," said March. "I guess you'll just have to talk to him and see, since none of us has any money."

Alice sighed. Nothing was ever easy in Wonderland. "Well, I guess we should be going."

"Oh, we can't go with you," said Seamus.

"Most definitely not," said March.

Alice looked from one to the other. They looked completely serious. It was the last straw. Heat welled up to her face and she felt the prick of tears in her eyes. "But," was all she managed to say before a great sob burst from her chest and hot tears rolled down her cheeks.

Seamus flapped his hands about, unsure what to do to console Alice since she was only a couple of inches tall. He finally reached down with a finger and managed to stroke the top of her head. Alice swatted him away and continued to sob.

Lyla stepped up behind her and rubbed her back gently, cooing in her sweet, soothing voice. "There, there, dear. They would go with you if they would be of any help. They aren't much good if they go without Tea for too long. I will go with you though, and I think we may have some other friends that will help."

Alice looked up through her blurry eyes and found that two new hulking shapes were standing beside the table. She blinked and rubbed at her eyes until she could clearly see that Dee and Dum were standing there grinning down at her.

"We heard that Alice was in need of some transport," said Dum.

"What he said," said Dee.

"How did you hear that?" asked Alice.

"That annoying cat," grumbled Dee. "One of these days I'm going to skin him and wear his invisible hide as a hat."

"Wouldn't be much of a hat if it was invisible, Dee," said Dum.

"Well, whatever. I'd still know it was there keeping me head warm and that's good enough."

"So," said Alice, cutting them off before they could spiral into an hour long conversation, "you said you would be willing to take me where I need to go?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A few minutes later, Dee, Dum, Lyla, and Alice were headed down the street outside Tea Time. Alice and Lyla were perched atop Dum's shoulder, which was much nicer than one would think. To Alice it seemed very much like sitting on a massive bed that swayed gently as if trying to rock her to sleep.

"How far from here to the caterpillar's place?" asked Alice.

"Not long," said Dee unhelpfully.

"Probably about a half hour on foot," said Dum, rolling his eyes at his brother.

Alice turned to Lyla who was sharpening her sword with a small stone. "What do you think Absolem will want for some of that mushroom, or whatever it will take to make me big again?"

"No idea," said Lyla, pausing in her sharpening. "Could be he'll want a thousand credits and could be he'll want a bit of pocket lint. That caterpillar is a strange one."

"Well, I don't even have any pocket lint," said Alice, sighing heavily.

"I've got gobs of it," said Dee, digging in his pocket. "Belly button lint too, if you need it. He started to lift his shirt.

"I'll let you know," said Alice. She averted her eyes as Dee began poking around in his belly button with a thick finger. "Thank you."

Dee dropped his shirt and tucked it behind Snicker-snack, which he'd clipped to his belt. It didn't look like much more than a dagger next to his tall frame. "All right, Miss Alice, you let me know if you need it."

They walked on in companionable silence for several minutes, Dee and Dum making good progress with their long legs. Lyla scurried about from one of Dum's shoulders to the other, her whiskers constantly twitching, her nose sniffing the air.

"Is something wrong?" asked Alice. She looked around, expecting a whole platoon of card guards to file out of every alley they walked by. The

streets were relatively deserted. Dawn had begun to brighten the sky on their left.

"Something just doesn't smell right," said Lyla, her nose twitching even more furiously.

"Is it the palace guards? Have they found me?"

"No, the cards smell like metal and idiocy. This is very different. I think something is stalking us." Lyla climbed up Dum's hair, causing him to roll his shoulder. Alice clung to his shirt to avoid being knocked off.

"Hey, that tickles," said Dum.

"Sorry, thought the top of your head might give me a better vantage point. I think something is following us."

"Some thing?" asked Dum, taking the words right out of Alice's mouth.

"What do you mean, some thing?" asked Dee. "You mean like a Bandersnatch?"

"Nonsense," said Dum, "the last of the Bandersnatches was killed years ago."

"No it ain't, nonsense. I seen one just a couple of weeks ago, sleeping in that park right on Bandersnatch Boulevard," countered Dee. "That's not too far from here."

"Dee, just because it's called Bandersnatch Boulevard doesn't mean that there are Bandersnatches living there," said Dum, rubbing a hand across his face. "How many times do we have to go over this?"

"I ain't stupid, Dum, I got it the first time you told me. That don't mean that I didn't see one there anyway."

"What's a Bandersnatch?" asked Alice.

"It's a big, hairy--" started Dee.

"It's right behind us," shouted Lyla, sliding down Dum's hair and drawing her sword at the same time. "Alice, hop on my back, I need to get you somewhere safer while we fight this thing."

Alice turned to see what all the fuss was about and nearly fainted. The Bandersnatch was a gargantuan beast with dark brown fur covering most of its body. Tufts of gray formed a ruff around its head. It stood on all fours with its front paws turned slightly inward. There wasn't any other creature that it could be easily compared to. It was easily taller than Alice's normal height at its shoulder and must have weighed as much as a car. It sniffed the air and curled its lips back in a snarl that almost resembled a grin. Even

from twenty meters away, its heavy musk permeated the air, smelling like moldy earth.

The beast threw back its head in a howl that rattled the windows in the buildings around it.

"No," said Alice. "I'm not letting anyone fight for me unless I'm fighting with them. Do you have another weapon that I can use?"

Lyla looked from Alice back to the Bandersnatch. It was still staring them down, drool dripping from its open maw as it clawed at the pavement with its dinner-plate-sized paws. Its claws left grooves in the pavement. Dee and Dum were pulling weapons from bags they carried slung over their shoulders. There wasn't much time left before the battle would begin.

"Fine," said Lyla, running her hand around the hilt of her sword. There was a metallic click and the blade split into two. "Take one of these and stay behind me. Dum, put us on the ground."

"Yes, Miss Dormouse," said Dum.

He scooped them both up gently in his hand before Alice had a chance to object. She needn't have worried. Dum was as gentle as a mother with its babe as he lowered them to the ground. Lyla and Alice stepped from his hand and turned to face the Bandersnatch.

It lashed its tail back and forth. While the beast resembled a bear or giant dog in many respects, its tail was thick and heavy, and covered with ridges of flesh that resembled an alligator. It let out one more howl and then charged, shaking the ground as it ran.

Before Alice could even respond, Lyla was darting forward on all fours, her sword returned to her back. She met the Bandersnatch on its third or fourth stride. It ignored her completely, to its own peril. Lyla was so fast that Alice could hardly see her. She climbed the Bandersnatch's fur and was soon hanging from its neck as it galumphed forward.

Dee and Dum stood waiting. Dee held a pair of wicked double-bladed axes the length of his forearms, a wide grin on his face. Dum held a spiked mace in his right hand and a shield on his left arm, looking grim.

Alice watched in horrified awe as the Bandersnatch passed right over top of her, one of its paws narrowly missing her. She didn't even have time to strike at it.

Just as the Bandersnatch was about to collide with Dum's shield, it let out a pained shriek and pitched on its side. Alice looked up in time to see a

small brown form come flying from the beast's ear. Lyla landed with a soft thump next to Alice.

"Are you okay?" asked Alice, looking Lyla over for the injuries she had to have sustained after falling so far.

"Just fine," said Lyla, pulling herself back up on her hind legs. "Why?"

"You fell so far!"

Lyla grinned. "Things are different when you're this small. I'm light enough that most falls don't really bother me. Think about it, I bet you've seen small animals jump or fall from trees without any harm, right?"

Alice didn't even have a chance to respond before Lyla was on the move again. Her sword was out, blood glinting on the steel, and she charged toward the creature. It had only taken a tumble and had righted itself almost immediately. Its wicked claws kept Dee and Dum at bay until it gained its feet. Rancid slobber pelted Alice when the beast shook its head which now tilted to the left.

"How do you like your pierced eardrum, you snarling sack of rat crap?" howled Lyla.

The Bandersnatch responded with a howl and lashed out at Dee with a huge paw. Dee hopped to the side, narrowly avoiding its razor sharp claws, and countered with a slash from his axe. The Bandersnatch jumped back with much more agility than seemed natural for a creature of its size. Dee, Dum, and the Bandersnatch began to slowly circle each other. Lyla was nowhere to be seen. Alice looked down at the sword in her small hands and frowned. It didn't seem like much of a weapon when going up against a beast the relative size of a house, but she had to try. Her friends were risking their lives.

Alice held her sword in the air and charged, letting out a piercing howl. She hoped it might distract the Bandersnatch, but it didn't seem to notice. Once she closed on the beast's rear paw, some of the knowledge Snicker-snack had fed her rose to the surface of her thoughts. The sword had managed to teach her a few things, not just show her how to do a couple of cool moves in the moment.

Alice circled behind the Bandersnatch. Thick fur covered its hind leg, so she began hacking away at it. The beast was an impolite creature, constantly circling, and periodically lunging at Dee and Dum. Despite the difficulty, she eventually cleared away the fur and was able to begin striking at the back of the Bandersnatch's leg, just above its paw. She wished fervently that

she had the vorpal sword and its ability to cut through things with ease. Her arm was already beginning to tire.

The hide was much easier to cut than all the fur had been and Alice hacked away with abandon. The Bandersnatch took notice after a few slashes, though it didn't do more than shake its leg like livestock trying to rid itself of a bug.

As much work as Alice had put in, only about a minute had passed since she joined the fight. Dee and Dum continued to harry the Bandersnatch, but neither had managed to land a blow. Lyla was still unaccounted for.

Then, with a wicked lunge, the Bandersnatch lashed out and swiped a paw across Dee's forearm. A set of bright red claw marks appeared, dripping blood, and Dee dropped one of his axes. Dum responded immediately by bashing the Bandersnatch in the head with his shield while it was distracted.

The Bandersnatch staggered back, shaking its head and nearly trampling Alice. Then, it let out another snarl and rubbed at its right ear with its paw. A triumphant shout issued from the area of its neck and then Lyla appeared on the ground beneath the creature with a wicked grin on her face. Her grin faded when she looked around the battlefield.

"Over here," called Alice, once again going to work on the leg.

"Genius," replied Lyla, running to her side. "Achilles tendon. I should have thought of that."

They both hacked at the leg while the Bandersnatch wobbled back and forth, still dealing with its second pierced eardrum and a blow to the head. It didn't seem to notice them working on its leg.

Dee had recovered his axe while Dum stood in front of him, feinting attacks at the Bandersnatch. "I'll be fine little brother," called Dee. "Let's kill this damned thing and be done with it."

"Yarrr!" responded Dum, sounding more like his brother Dee.

"Yarrr!" echoed Dee and they charged at the same time, one coming at the Bandersnatch from each side.

The Bandersnatch dodged Dee's attack and then lunged headlong at Dum, who brought up his shield just in time to take the creature's weight and go flying backward. The Bandersnatch rebounded off the shield and came skidding back toward Lyla and Alice. Dum lay in a heap against a building, but there was little they could do about that. Instead, they redoubled their efforts, hacking and slashing at the beast's leg. Finally, just when Alice thought her arm was about to fall off, there was a sickening snap of the

tendon letting go. Suddenly, the right side of the beast was dropping toward them. A yowl of pain so loud it hurt their ears ripped through the early morning.

If it weren't for Lyla, Alice would have been crushed beneath the enormous weight of the Bandersnatch's rear end. Lyla immediately raced into action, pulling Alice by the arm so hard she thought she may have dislocated her shoulder. Alice tripped and fell, unable to keep up with Lyla's frantic retreat. They avoided being crushed by mere centimeters.

Alice looked up to meet Lyla's gaze and thank her. They both smiled, and then Lyla was gone. She didn't run away, there was a loud whooshing sound, and she just disappeared. Alice looked around for an explanation and saw a large branch lashing back and forth overhead. Then she saw that it was covered in thick ridges of fur. It was the Bandersnatch's tail, whipping wildly as it dealt with the pain in its leg.

"Lyla!" shouted Alice. Her heart sunk into her stomach. There was no way the tiny dormouse could have survived a hit from that enormous tail. Alice couldn't even see where she'd gone, she'd been tossed so far.

Another whooshing sound shocked Alice back to reality, helping her push down her grief. She had to move or she would suffer the same fate as her friend.

She picked herself up and grabbed the sword Lyla had given her. Not because she intended to do more violence, but because she needed something to remember her friend by and she wasn't about to let it get crushed under the paws of her killer. Alice raced with all the speed she could muster over toward Dee and Dum.

The brothers were slashing fiercely at the Bandersnatch and had opened several cuts on its shoulders and one on its head. She had just made it to her friends when the Bandersnatch whipped around wildly and bolted down the street. Dee let out a fierce roar and took a couple of steps to follow it before Dum managed to pull him back.

"Let it go brother," said Dum.

"Argh!" responded Dee. He tugged futilely at his brother's restraining grip for a few seconds and then his shoulders slumped. "Fine. I'm too tired to run anyway."

"Yes, and that's the only thing stopping you from killing the bastard," said Dum, managing to not even sound sarcastic.

"Damn, right. I woulda mounted his head on our wall," grumbled Dee, looking down at the deep cuts on his arm with disdain.

Dum reached into his backpack near their feet and pulled out a roll of bandages. Dee automatically held out his arm to his brother so he could take care of it. "Watch your feet, brother. Lyla and young Alice are about here somewhere."

"I think they got the bugger's hind leg," said Dee. He pulled his arm back from his brother and looked at him warily. "No alcohol...please."

"No alcohol," said Dum, leaning down to rummage in his pack again. "Just let me get some water to clean off the blood." He reached into the pack and pulled out a clear bottle that clearly said vodka on the side and looked over to see Alice. He gave her a wink and then stood back up. "Now give me back your arm and say hello to Alice down there."

Dee looked where Dum had pointed and smiled his silly grin that she remembered from first meeting him. "Quite a brawl there, Alice. Ouch!" The last came as Dum poured the vodka over his wound. "You said no alcohol!"

"Well, if I don't, it'll get infected and you'll lose the whole arm. Is that what you want?"

"No," said Dee sulkily.

"Good," said Dum, giving his brother a sympathetic smile. He began to wrap the bandages around the wounded arm and turned to Alice. "Where's Lyla?"

Alice dropped her sword to the ground and felt the heat rise to her face. There wasn't any stopping the tears this time. Someone she knew and who had been by her side just a few minutes ago was dead. She put her hands over her face and sobbed, and then sobbed harder when her vision cleared enough for her to see the clothes she was wearing. They were clothes that Lyla had given her and helped her make. "She's...she's...gone," she finally managed between coughs.

"What do you mean, she's gone?" asked Dee. "We've got a mission to complete here. We've got to get you big again."

"No, Dee, she's dead," said Dum as quietly as he could manage.

His booming normal sized voice hit Alice like a hammer, caving her chest in and causing her to crumple to the ground. When she got up, she knew she would have to continue on her mission and get off this wretched planet, but

she would be going alone. Nobody else needed to be hurt to help her. She wasn't anybody important.

"Who's dead?" said a small husky voice just behind Alice.

Alice whipped around, scraping her knees on the pavement. It couldn't be. She'd been hit so hard. But it was. Lyla was standing right there, a crooked grin on her face, despite the swollen eye and a spot of blood around her mouth.

"Oh, Lyla," crooned Alice. She pulled herself up off the ground and raced over to wrap the dormouse in a crushing hug. "You're alive!"

Lyla winced and Alice relaxed her grip. "Take a lot more than some stupid Bandersnatch tail to take me down."

"But you're hurt," said Alice, looking Lyla over for more injuries.

"Well of course I am," said Lyla exuberantly. "I think I was airborne for about three days before I landed in that trash heap over there. It was a pretty soft landing all things considered, but I think I lost consciousness because when I opened my eyes next, I heard you over here keening."

"You're not badly hurt, though?" asked Alice, still unable to believe a creature as small as the dormouse could take such a beating.

"Bumps and bruises mostly, though I expect you all to nod along when I tell this story to future generations and I come out looking like a mashed potato." She laughed long and hard about that and that sound made Alice happier than she could ever have imagined.

"Well, you did take down the Bandersnatch pretty much singlehanded," said Dum, grinning fiercely.

"Not even close," countered Dee, missing the point entirely. That time everyone laughed, even Dee.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The rest of the trip to Absolem's place was uneventful. Alice and Lyla returned to their perch on Dum's shoulder and kept a watchful eye for more danger. Alice tried to return the other half of Lyla's sword to her, but she refused to take it.

"You did a fine job on that beastie," she said. "You hang onto it until you get your proper sword back on your hip. I can't imagine anyone better to have my back than you."

"Neither can I," said Alice. Lyla pulled a sword belt out of her pack and helped her buckle it on.

"Bah, you don't have to flatter me," said Lyla, but her black eyes held a proud glint.

"Well, this is the place," said Dum, stepping up to the door of the only well maintained building in the area.

The building didn't look like much from far away, but from closer up it was an immaculate house, more of a mansion, really. It seemed better suited for a country setting with a dirt path leading up to the home. Instead, it was surrounded by asphalt. There wasn't even really a yard to speak of. Most of the greenery in front of it was kept in large pots. Only a couple of large trees had spots punched through the asphalt and into the ground.

One tree in particular caught the eye. It was a large fruit tree, but it looked rather peculiar because of the many different shades of the leaves. Alice stepped close and noticed that there were plums, peaches, and several other varieties of fruits that she didn't immediately recognize, all growing on the same tree. On closer inspection there were a lot more types of branches that weren't currently producing fruit.

"That's impossible," said Alice, for what felt like the hundredth time.

"The caterpillar loves rare things," said Lyla. "Maybe that's why he's taken an interest in you."

Alice blushed and tilted her head down to look at Dum's shirt between her knees. "I'm just a girl."

"Well," said Lyla, "no 'just a girl' I know has left her home planet, stolen from the queen, cut off one of her guest's hands, and gotten shrunk down to mouse size all in the course of a day."

"But most of those are things that just happened. They don't really make me rare or special."

"Life just happens, Alice. What makes us special is how we react to it."

Alice didn't know what to say to that, so she stayed silent.

Dum, who had obviously been waiting for them to finish their conversation, reached up and knocked on the door. It made a resounding thunk. One of the thugs that had menaced at Absolem's side opened the door, a gun in his hand.

"You don't have an appointment," said the thug. He waved the gun back out toward the sidewalk. "Bugger off."

Dee growled and reached for his pack, obviously intending to do violence. "I'll show you our appointment, you little toad." The man didn't seem at all phased by Dee, who stood a full head above him and probably weighed twice as much.

"Tell Absolem that young Alice is here to see him," said Dum, placing a meaty hand on his brother's arm to stop him from pulling out an axe.

"Who the hell is Alice, and why would Absolem care?" asked the thug, looking around the stoop to see if there were other hidden characters lurking.

"Young Alice is right here," said Dum. He knelt so that the thug was on a good level to see her and Lyla perched on his shoulder. "And I think that's exactly why he would care."

The thug stepped closer and squinted at Alice, his terrible breath blowing over her in a hot wave. He smelled like alcohol and cigarettes mixed with rotting meat. "Oh, it's the brat that thought she was a pirate, and now she's the size of a rat. Brat, rat." He laughed to himself. "Look, I'm a poet and didn't even know it. This should be good for a laugh." The thug stepped back away from the door to allow them to come in. "Take off your shoes."

They stepped from the grimy outside and into opulence. The floors in the entryway were marble and a grand staircase curved up from either side to the second floor of the house. A table in front of them held a crystal sculpture of a gigantic butterfly that wasn't held up with any sort of mechanism that Alice could detect. It seemed to just float there. She longed to run her hands around it to see if there were tiny wires that she just

couldn't see. Sadly, she was too small to do so without a lot of help and it seemed more inappropriate to ask Dum to do it for her.

"Wait here while I tell Absolem," said the thug. He'd holstered his gun, but in another entryway, his companion stood with his own trained on them.

The first thug walked out of the room to their right and into a massive living space covered with plush couches and chairs that sat on more marble floors. In front of them sat thick rugs with lots of fine details. The caterpillar was obviously doing well in his affairs and that was probably in part due to his requirement for payment. Alice wasn't very optimistic about her chances of getting help from him.

At the far end of the room, the thug stopped and spoke quietly to a figure that was hidden around a corner. At his feet could be seen just a small bit of blue that could have been a strangely colored ottoman if it didn't have several small feet under it. As Alice watched, it began to undulate and then disappeared around the corner for a moment to be replaced by the large bulk of Absolem's upper body. He didn't acknowledge them standing at his front door. He simply creped up onto a long sofa that had to have been specially built for him and reclined there, picking up the tube to a hookah and settling it into his mouth.

The thug with the gun off to the left said, "Absolem will see you now," and waved them into the living room. The thug who had greeted them at the door had taken up a standing position behind the couch where Absolem sat.

Dee walked boldly forward on his stocking feet, and Dum followed, his head turning every direction. Alice followed his gaze and found many more of Absolem's men watching from the second story, guns pointed down at them. They seemed bored and ready to do some shooting.

Alice tried to ignore them so that she would be able to speak without a quaver in her voice. If she was going to enlist the caterpillar's help, she needed to sound confident, not like a little girl who was about to cry. Focusing on the rest of the living room helped. There were several more of the crystal sculptures positioned around the room, all seeming to float on air, each of them depicting a different nature scene. In one corner was a waterfall that was falling up into a pool on the ceiling. Once they were fully into the room the subtle sounds became noticeable, as well as the slight green tint to the light. It was as if they were walking into a forest clearing and there was wildlife and plants just out of sight, though none were really in evidence. With all the plants outside, it was clear that there could have

been more inside. The choice had been made to exclude them to enhance the wonder of the special effects in the room.

Dee and Dum stepped up to face the caterpillar, neither of them seeming to take notice of the splendor around them. They eyed the sofa behind them, but remained standing. "I present young Alice," said Dum formally, gesturing to his shoulder.

"Ah yes, Alice, you've changed so much since last we met," said Absolem, puffing his hookah. "Is it possible that it's been just a day?"

"Yes, I seem to have shrunk," said Alice.

"Oh, have you?" asked the caterpillar, squinting at Alice though his haze of smoke. "I hadn't noticed. Your stature is of no consequence. Sometimes I am this size and other times, smaller than even you. The changes of which I spoke are nothing to do with your size."

"So you do know how to make me large again?" asked Alice hopefully.

"Again, size is of no consequence. I know how to make you great." He smiled at her serenely, his many hands, or feet—it was hard to know what to call them—flexing and closing. "Wouldn't you much rather be great than large?"

Alice suppressed the urge to argue. Argument never got you anywhere in Wonderland. "But if I could be, why shouldn't I want to be both great and large?"

"Ha! You truly have grown so much since we last spoke. It's a wonder that you're able to sit on your manservant's shoulder." Absolem leaned forward, his large, worm-like bulk lifting off the couch, improbably hanging in the air so that he could bring his face close to hers. "You have finally learned the art of Wonderland society. Why answer a question when you could instead pose your own question in return?"

Alice thought carefully for a moment before giving her response. It had to be carefully crafted. "It did take some getting used to, but how could I have failed when I had such a masterful teacher as yourself?"

"Splendid!" shouted the caterpillar, falling back onto his couch. His whole body shook with deep, rumbling laughter. His hands flailed about so much that he nearly yanked his hookah right off the table. A servant that couldn't have been there just a moment ago stepped up and righted it before it fell and just as promptly faded back into the background. His laughter carried on so long that soon everyone joined in, including his henchmen up on the second floor. His laughter died off slowly and he turned back to Alice with a

wry smile. "Let's dispense with the niceties of society and get down to business, shall we?" Absolem snorted. "I swear, that last one was an accident. It's hard to turn off once you get going."

Alice watched the caterpillar warily. She didn't think him mad any more, he was merely strange. So at least he might be rational in some situations. "I'm sure you've already deduced my reason for coming to you," said Alice, waving a hand down at her body.

"Actually, I don't understand at all," said the caterpillar, puffing a fresh blast of smoke in her direction. "I already, by a strange coincidence indeed, gave you exactly what you need to solve your current minuscule predicament."

"So, the mushroom will make me large again?" asked Alice.

"It will," said Absolem. "But I must confess, I'm curious as to what made you small in the first place."

Alice opened her mouth and was about to tell Absolem that it was drinking Tea that made her small, but then she remembered something she'd read in one of her pirate books. Never give information away for free. Most times it's more valuable than gold. Instead she was silent for a moment and shared a private smile with Lyla, hoping to deepen the mystery. "Well, I could be persuaded to tell you if I could get another of those mushrooms you gave me."

Absolem narrowed his eyes at her and frowned. "It doesn't matter to me one way or the other. Just a bit of idle curiosity."

"Well, then, if it doesn't matter, I guess I'll keep my business to myself," said Alice, keeping her face as neutral as she could manage. She could tell he was interested. Powerful people like him weren't used to being told they couldn't have something they wanted.

"Oh, come now, no need to be unreasonable. If you have something of worth to offer me in addition to the information, I may be persuaded to part with a mushroom for you."

Alice sighed. It had been worth a try, but Absolem wasn't going to give her a mushroom just to satisfy his curiosity. "The only thing I have is worth much more than some stinky old mushroom," said Alice sulkily.

"You can't give it to him, Alice," whispered Lyla. "It's part of Seamus' vision. You're going to need it."

"Now you do truly have my attention," said Absolem, rubbing his many hands together greedily. "An item of great value that's associated with a

prophecy from the mad hatter?"

Alice frowned at Lyla. Apparently whispering, even from a dormouse, didn't seem to get past the great blue caterpillar. "Dee, show him the sword."

Dee slowly reached up and pulled the sword from his waist. The sound of cocking guns could be heard from the second floor. Absolem held up one of his hands and waved them off.

"Bring it to me," called the caterpillar, gesturing Dee forward. "That does look like a rare specimen indeed." He leaned forward and then tilted his head back. "Glasses!" A short man in a servant's uniform trotted up and offered the caterpillar a pair of simple wire framed spectacles. Absolem settled them on his face, perching them on a pair of his hands which seemed to serve in place of a nose. The servant trotted away and the caterpillar leaned forward, hovering over the sword that Dee presented. "Those runes, I haven't seen the like in decades. What do they say?"

"Snicker-snack," said Alice, a bright smile on her face.

Absolem reared back as if he'd been bitten, holding his hands out in front of him. Even the ones acting as his nose made the clear gesture to stop, causing his glasses to drop to the rug with a soft thump. "Get that thing away from me," he shouted. "Get it out of my house!"

"But, it's all that I have for trade," said Alice, confusion wrinkling her brow.

"Get that thing as far away from here as you can and maybe I won't have you killed," roared Absolem. Servants were massing around him in confusion, hoping to do something to calm their master.

Dee pulled the sword back and returned it to the sheath at his waist. He looked askance at Dum, who in turn looked down at Alice on his shoulder.

"Why are you acting like this?" asked Alice, not sure what else to do. She had to get a mushroom, or she would be stuck like this.

"You stole something from the queen and are bringing it into my household. Everyone knows the queen puts tracking devices in everything she values." Absolem heaved his bulk off of the couch and trundled over to the nearest window. "Her guards are probably outside already."

"I can't leave until I get a mushroom," replied Alice, her tiny voice raising an octave. "I won't be able to defend myself if she comes for me."

"Fine, fine," grumbled Absolem. "Servant, bring these people one of the mushrooms so that they will get out of here with haste."

"Thank you," said Alice.

"Don't thank me," said Absolem, turning to glare at Alice. "It's just easier to do this than having the guards shoot you and having to deal with the mess. Be thankful that I just reupholstered this room."

One of the uniformed servants stepped up beside Dum and held out his hand, a small, plain looking toadstool sat on his palm. Dum took it and sat it between Alice and Lyla on his shoulder.

Alice looked from the mushroom, which was nearly as large as she was, back to Absolem. He didn't seem as angry as his bluster. Mostly, he just seemed nervous. "I'm sorry if I brought you any trouble, Absolem. I didn't mean to. And if it makes any difference, I was shrunk by drinking the Tea at Tea Time."

For a moment the worry slid from the caterpillar's face. "Well, that is interesting indeed. I've never heard of such a thing happening. Maybe it's because you're Nedran, or maybe it's because you're not mad enough." The caterpillar paced, lost in thought, and then whipped his head back around to look at Alice. "Thank you for the information, now be on your way."

"You're welcome," said Alice. "I hope that we meet again some day." She reached out and tore off a chunk of the mushroom and took a small bite.

"As do I, Alice, hopefully under much better circumstances," said Absolem in between glances out the window and muttered orders to his guards and servants.

"Let's go," said Alice, and Dee and Dum marched back to the door and slid on their shoes.

Alice took another bite of her mushroom and grimaced. It tasted rather a lot like dirt and something horribly bitter. No wonder her mother had told her not to eat them. Lyla watched her intensely. "If you want to try out being big, you can have some," offered Alice.

"No, thank you," said Lyla, shaking her head emphatically. "Big people always seem to get into big trouble. I'm fine staying small and keeping my small troubles."

Alice gasped as a wave of dizziness swept over her, causing her to lean to one side. Lyla was next to her in an instant, bracing her arm. Alice clutched at her, unable to tell down from up as the room began to tilt and spin. She could feel Dum's shoulder beneath her, but her senses told her that instead of down, that was sideways, so she needed to lean to correct that. Finally, all sense of direction abandoned her and it felt as if she floated out into

space. She scrambled frantically for thoughts that could help her make sense of what was happening, but everything in her head seemed so far away and wrapped in fog.

Alice grasped for anything to hold on to, mentally, or physically, but found nothing. Emptiness swirled around her as if she were lost in the vacuum of space. Finally, when she thought she couldn't handle the spinning of the universe around her any more, her consciousness fled, leaving her in a peaceful, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A cool draft across her bare legs roused Alice from her sleep. Harsh light stabbed her eyes, making it impossible to see. Cool air touched every part of her body. She was naked. Beneath her she could feel some cloth, so she clutched it to her chest and blinked her eyes furiously, willing them to adjust to the bright light.

Once she could finally see, her surroundings were familiar, but not in a good way. Beneath her was a clear plastic bench with a thin, rough mattress. Surrounding her were four clear plastic walls. She was in The Red Palace jail. In the cell next to her was either Dee or Dum, it was impossible to tell until she talked to him. The cloth she had clutched to her chest were the clothes the queen had given her to play croquet, still bloodstained. At least she had something to put on. She was sure she had Dee to thank for that as he'd put those clothes in his pack.

She dressed herself as quickly and discreetly as she could and then looked down at her body in wonder. She was back to her normal size again.

“Oh, young Alice, you’re awake,” said Dum, obviously pretending to have just noticed once she was dressed. His voice was somewhat muted, but she could still hear him courtesy of small holes around the top of the plastic walls.

“Yes, but I think I’ve woken up in a nightmare,” said Alice, waving a hand at their surroundings.

Dum nodded solemnly and looked around him, his eyes resting on Dee in the cell on her other side. Most of what could be seen of his body was covered in bruises, scrapes, and cuts. “He fought valiantly for you. Sadly there were too many of them for the three of us to take. He was the one that stayed with you and kept them off of you for as long as he could.”

Alice gasped. “He got all of those injuries trying to protect me?”

Dum shook his head and sighed. “No, he wasn’t that badly injured out there. He may not be the brightest, but he knows when he’s lost a fight. We surrendered when it became pointless to fight any longer.”

"Then where did he get the rest of his injuries?" asked Alice.

Dum knocked on the thick plastic wall between their cells. "Trying to bash his way out of here. He hates being locked up," said Dum with a chuckle. "I wouldn't recommend you try it."

Alice smiled down at Dee, snoring loudly on his cot. He may not be very smart, but he was loyal and kind and she couldn't ask for much more in a friend. "How long have I been asleep?"

"For most of the day," said Dum, pointing at the windows in the back of their cells. "It's almost dark."

"Where's Lyla?"

"She's right here," said a tiny voice near her feet.

"Oh, Lyla," said Alice, trying to keep a smile off her face. "I know they didn't capture you, so why ever are you here?"

"I didn't want to leave you alone," said Lyla, a shy smile lighting up her small face until she cleared her throat. "Besides, the guards were talking about feeding you to the Jabberwock, so I thought I might be able to get my revenge if I tagged along."

Alice held out her hand for Lyla to climb aboard and raised her to her face immediately when she did. She nuzzled the tiny dormouse with her cheek, the closest thing she could think of to a hug with a person so small. Lyla, for her part, squeezed Alice's cheek and then pretended not to care.

"So, what's this about the Jabberwock?" asked Alice.

"Don't really know much. Just heard one of the guards going on about how beheading was too good for you, and that you'd make a good snack for the Jabberwock." Lyla climbed up Alice's arm and took a seat on her shoulder.

"What do you think, Dum?"

"I think that whatever it is, it can't be good," said Dum, sighing. Alice urged him to continue. "The queen loves a good beheading, so if she's not going to do that, what she has planned is going to be much worse."

"I don't think it could get much worse than beheading," said Alice. Her whole body shivered at the thought.

"Oh, there's plenty worse than beheading," said Dee, sleep still heavy in his voice.

Lyla glared at him, but his eyes were still half closed and she was so tiny that he didn't notice.

"There's flaying, boiling, dismemberment, eating alive--"

"Dee," said Dum, his voice a hoarse growl.

Dee took in the horrified look on Alice's face and lowered his head.

"Sorry," he muttered.

Alice shook her head, trying to dislodge all of the horrible thoughts that were conjured up by Dee's words. They didn't want to be dislodged though. Now all she could do was picture herself in each of those situations and others she remembered from the more grisly pirate tales she'd read. Her breath came in short ragged gasps and her vision started to go dark at the edges.

"Long, deep breaths, Alice," said Lyla softly in her ear. "Nice and slow. Don't you worry now. I won't let any of that stuff happen to you. Do you believe me?"

Soft paws stroked the hair behind her ear and Alice focused on the soothing words that Lyla kept repeating in her tiny, husky voice. Slowly, her breathing returned to normal and her vision cleared from the dark tunnel it had been reduced to. The images of torture still danced in the back of her mind, but they weren't overwhelming any more.

"Well, well, well," said a cold feminine voice from the corridor. "Down here just a few hours and already you've made friends with the rats. How fitting." The queen glared at her with such malice that Alice took a step back. "Watch out little rat, before you know it, this one will steal your most prized piece of cheese and use it against you." She held up her right hand and brandished the vorpal sword. "I doubt you'll have the resources to take it back from her like I did though. You see, little rat, I always get what I want and nobody ever gets away with taking what's mine."

"Hide," Alice whispered to Lyla.

"Never," said Lyla, stiffening her back and raising her chin proudly.

"Guards!" called the queen, her voice shrill and echoing in the close confines. A pair of card guards tromped up to her and saluted. "Why are there rats in my jail?"

The guards' mouths dropped open and they looked at one another and then followed the queen's gaze over to Lyla, perched on Alice's shoulder. "Must have snuck in with the prisoner," said the guard bearing the number three. The other guard winced. His number was eight. He must have known that was a bad answer.

"How is there any sneaking going on in my jail?" asked the queen, her voice barely above a whisper and full of venom.

"I, um, I don't know, your majesty," replied Number Three, his lips trembling.

The queen's demeanor changed immediately. Her hateful sneer was replaced with a winning smile and her eyes glittered with sincere delight. "Well, then, that's just fine. If you don't know, you don't know. But what are you going to do about it?"

"I'm going to catch the rat and get rid of it!" said Number Three, seizing the words like they were a flotation device and he was lost at sea.

"Not bloody likely," retorted Lyla.

"How delightful," said the queen, clapping her hands with girlish enthusiasm. "And if you don't?"

"Then I'll resign my post?" asked Number Three after thinking for several seconds.

"Well, it will be hard for you to resign if you don't have a head, but I'd hardly think it necessary at that point," said the queen, her voice still dripping with honey.

By then Number Three was shaking so badly that his companion practically had to hold him on his feet. "Open two thirty-eight," called Number Eight down the corridor, and shoved his companion inside as soon as the plastic door to Alice's cell raised high enough to admit him. "Close two thirty-eight."

The guard stumbled into the cell and looked Alice over, his eyes wide with terror. Alice almost felt bad for him and then she remembered the bite of the baton that he carried at his waist and the lunges of all the guards trying to kill her in the lobby. "Where did it go?" demanded the guard.

Alice simply shrugged. Lyla had started moving the instant the door opened. She was gone so quickly that Alice wasn't even sure where she'd gone.

The guard spun around in circles, looking down at the floor. He drew his baton apparently planning to club Lyla to death. Still the little dormouse was nowhere to be found. After a few frantic seconds of spinning the guard turned to his companion standing outside. "Do you see it?" he begged.

Number Eight didn't so much as blink an eye. The queen nodded approvingly at him. "See, that's how you get to be an eight," she said, still in her painfully cheerful voice. "You don't disappoint your queen. Now, find that rat."

Alice pondered trying to steal the guard's sword which still hung from his belt, but discarded the idea. There was no way that would end well for her, even if she did manage to dispatch him. That was probably why Lyla hadn't used the open door as an opportunity to escape and try to do harm to the queen. Instead, she was currently climbing up Number Three's back.

The queen and Number Eight watched silently, the guard casting wary glances from his companion to his queen.

Number Three jumped and shouted, finally feeling Lyla on his back. "It's on me, it's on me," he screamed. For the moment, it appeared, he was more afraid of rodents than losing his life.

That was unfortunate for him, but it only seemed to provide the queen even greater joy. "Oh, it's just a rat," taunted the queen, her bright smile never wavering. She fingered the hilt of the vorpal sword idly. "Hit it with your club," she said helpfully.

The guard either took it as an order or thought it a helpful suggestion and began an ill-advised assault on his own back with his baton. Each time he struck, he called out with pain, but continued to rain blows on himself. None of them ever even came near Lyla, who had climbed around to his front and was just mounting his shoulder.

The guard must have caught a glance of her because he suddenly stopped flailing about and stood perfectly still, his whole body trembling.

"I'm no rat!" shouted Lyla, drawing her sword and running across the guards chest and stopping on his other shoulder.

The guard spluttered, his face wrinkling in confusion before a thin red line appeared on his neck. He dropped his club and it hit the tile floor with a loud rattle. The queen and Number Eight leaned forward, unable to see what was happening since the guard was facing away from them. Alice had a perfect view. The guard reached up and clutched at his throat and tried to speak. Blood poured from his open mouth instead. A few seconds later it gushed around his fingers and he collapsed to the floor and began to convulse.

Lyla scurried over and climbed up to regain her perch on Alice's shoulder. "I'm a dormouse!" she said, wiping her sword clean on a rag and then sliding it back into her sheath on her back.

The queen clapped with delight. "Oh, that was wonderful. We should have more rats down here like that one. They could terrorize the prisoners before they go up to lose their heads!"

"I'll get on that as soon as we're done here, your Majesty," said Number Eight.

"Make sure they don't have swords though. I don't want them spoiling my beheading fun."

"Absolutely no swords, your Majesty," said Number Eight, nodding.

"Now, as for you, Alice, I have something even more fun in store. In a couple of hours you're going to earn back some of the esteem that I lost because of your little stunt with Karl." The queen hefted the vorpal sword. "You'll even get to play with your little toy some more."

"I don't want to play your sick games," said Alice. She crossed her arms and turned her back. She knew there was no way that anything the queen came up with would be good.

"That's fine dear, I could have my guards come and take you by force, but I won't. Instead I'll just start removing parts from your friends here every time you refuse," said the queen, her pleasant demeanor never faltering.

Alice spun around, her eyes wide. She knew that the queen would do exactly what she said, but there was still nothing to stop her from hurting her friends anyway once she did what was asked. "Fine, I'll do what you want, but you have to promise not to hurt my friends as long as I'm cooperating."

"Look at this!" said the queen, clapping her hands and grinning. "Even with no leverage the girl is bargaining. You could have gone far if you'd only learned to play along a little earlier." She shook her head and pouted her lower lip.

Alice opened her mouth, a denial on her lips, and then sighed, biting her words back. Nothing she said was going to change the queen's mind and if she went too far it could get her friends hurt. Still, she couldn't say nothing either. "I'm just sad that I didn't do more than cut off his arm," she said through gritted teeth.

"So much fire," said the queen, nodding appreciatively. "You'll need it in a few hours." She turned and marched off, Number Eight following behind her. "No harm will come to your friends as long as you're providing me with entertainment," she called back over her shoulder.

"This can't be good," said Lyla.

"Not at all," agreed Dee and Dum in unison.

"You should have just let her have us," said Dee. "We can handle it."

"I have no doubt you could handle it, my strong friend," said Alice. "I just know that I couldn't ever bear to watch it, and then, when I gave in, your sacrifice would have been for nothing. Better that I give in now while you are well and whole."

"You truly are a remarkable young woman," said Dum, a sad smile turning up one corner of his mouth. "If we get out of here, we'll follow you anywhere."

"Not me," said Dee. "I ain't following her into a room filled with snakes, no matter how many of my limbs she keeps on my body." He shuddered and then gave her a quick wink.

"Fine," said Dum with a laugh. "Anywhere but a room filled with snakes."

"Horrible creatures," said Dee, rolling his shoulders. "All squiggly."

Everyone had a good laugh again and then settled down in their cells to wait to see what the queen had waiting for Alice.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The next few hours were complete torture. There was nothing to do but sit and wait for the next terrible thing to happen. Dee tried to lighten the mood by juggling his boots and his balled up socks. It was amusing and everyone laughed and then returned immediately to sober silence.

Most of the time Alice just watched the sun set outside her window. It really was a beautiful sunset. It didn't matter what happened to her, the universe would continue. There would still be beautiful sunsets and love and heartbreak. What did it matter if she died?

Immediately, she thought of her parents. They didn't understand her, but she knew they would be devastated to lose her and that mattered. She didn't want to do that to them. That's when it struck her how much she truly missed home. Tears slid slowly down her cheeks. There didn't seem to be a way to make everything work out well. If she lived through whatever torture the queen was going to put her through, then the best she could hope for was to be stuck in this twisted world. Forever. At the queen's twisted beck and call.

"I wonder if that's what happened to Laxana?" she asked nobody in particular.

"I don't know what you're thinking, but you're a smart girl, you probably got it right," said the duchess, her voice thick with tears.

Alice turned to find the duchess standing outside her cell in normal clothes; gone was the beautiful gown and tiara. Her face was red and her eyes were puffy. "I'm so sorry this has happened to you Alice."

"It's not your fault," said Alice. She stood and walked over to the front wall of her cell and leaned her head on the thick plastic.

"It is. I was trying to keep you to myself so things like this wouldn't happen. I should have stepped in when she tried to give you to Karl. I was a coward."

"I said it's not your fault," repeated Alice. "I don't blame you for not wanting to lose your head for a girl you just met."

"But I should have tried. I heard what the queen is doing to you and your friends. You're willing to die for them and you just met them." Tears streamed down her beautiful face. Some people are ugly criers. Their face gets all red and splotchy and it creases in ugly ways. Laxana wasn't one of them. She just looked sad and sweet. "I guess if I were a stronger person I wouldn't have been here in the first place though."

"The queen did terrible things to you, didn't she?" asked Alice.

"Yes, she used my body to make her money, just like she had planned to do with you." She closed her eyes and leaned against the cell. "I let her think I'm a predator now, like the rest of her horrible court, so that I can save the girls that she finds before it's too late."

Alice longed to reach out and hug the duchess. She was just as much a victim as Alice was herself, maybe more so, since no one had been there to help her. "Don't cry," said Alice. "I'll be fine."

"That's what I kept telling myself," said the duchess, her eyes still closed, lost in private thoughts that Alice didn't want to even guess at. "And I still tell myself that every day. It's not fine. She still does horrible things to people, children, every day, and I do precious little to stop it. Nobody does."

"There's nothing you could have done," said Alice. Tears had started running down her own face. "You were just a child."

"And now I'm an adult and I'm going to do something about it." Laxana opened her eyes. Determination glowed behind them and her jaw was set. "I'm going to get you out of here," she whispered. She reached into the large purse slung over her shoulder and pulled out some sort of device with a metal tank on it. "This thing will cut you out of here in no time. I'll distract the guards."

"By letting them poke big holes in you with their swords?" hissed Lyla. "Put that thing away before you get us all killed even sooner."

Laxana frowned at the dormouse. "But I have to do something."

"You are doing something," said Lyla. "You're helping save the kids that she brings through here. You are living in your own personal nightmare to save children. That takes strength. There may come a time when you find something else to do with that strength, but this isn't it."

Alice nodded and put a hand up to Laxana's face even though she couldn't touch her through the wall. "We can take care of ourselves. Just your being here gives me strength. Put that device away and talk to me. That's all I need right now."

Laxana stood up straight and put the device back into her purse. She wiped at the tears on her face and took a slow deep breath. "You're right, the two of you. I can help in ways that won't get any of us killed." She reached out a hand and touched it to the plastic so that her palm met with Alice's. "Thank you, Alice, and you too, little dormouse."

Lyla stood up straight and beamed at Laxana. "You got it right, you called me a dormouse." She turned to Alice and said, "I knew there was a reason I liked her." To Laxana, she said, "Oh, and the name's Lyla. Pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise," said the duchess, managing a small smile.

After a short comfortable silence, Alice spoke up. "So, do you know what she has planned for me?"

Laxana frowned and shook her head. "Only that she was impressed with the way that you fought your way through her guards when you ran away, and that she's going to put you in the Imagisphere to do some sort of fighting contest."

"Well, that's more than I knew," said Alice. She rubbed her chin in thought. "I've heard a lot of talk about the Jabberwock from the guards. Is she going to put it in there with me?"

"I haven't heard anything from the queen directly about it, but I've heard the rumors too, so it's likely."

"Is it as bad as I've heard?" asked Alice, her eyes wide.

"Probably worse. Nobody's ever faced the Jabberwock directly and lived to tell the tale. Mostly she just puts people in the room with it so that its roar can drive them mad. But it's a horrible beast with razor sharp claws as long as your arm and fangs as long as your leg. It breathes fire, and while I've never seen it fly, it does have wings."

"Thank you. Knowing what I'm up against helps," said Alice, giving her a half-hearted attempt at a smile.

"I'll be rooting for you," said Laxana. "If there's anyone that can do this, it's you. You've shown more fire and determination in the face of the queen than anyone I've ever seen. I know that it will serve you well in the Imagisphere."

"Thank you, Laxana," said Alice. She kissed her fingers and held them up to the plastic. "I'd kiss and hug you if I could. Don't do anything to put yourself in danger."

"I'd carry you away from here on my own back if I could, lovely girl. Don't worry about me. I'll take care of myself."

With that, Laxana left the jail. Alice pressed against the plastic wall to watch her go as long as she could. The duchess turned and gave her a wave just as she passed out of her sight.

None of her friends spoke for a while and that was just as well. Alice wanted some time to be alone with her thoughts. She pondered the nature of strength. She'd been taught all her life that strength came in one form: physical prowess. That was clearly an idea brought into being by strong people, probably men. Laxana was definitely strong in a different way. She'd lived through horrible things that Alice could only imagine and come out the other side unbroken. Just thinking about her gave Alice hope. Hope that she could make it through anything, despite her meager amount of physical strength.

"I've made up my mind," said Alice to nobody in particular.

"Made up your mind about what?" asked Dee.

"I've decided that I'm not going to die today," said Alice.

"That's a good decision to make," said Dee, a large grin spreading over his face.

"I'm going to thumb my nose at whatever the queen throws at me," said Alice, surprised to hear the steel in her own voice.

"Yeah!" said Dee, pumping his fist in the air.

"I'm going to make the queen wish that she'd never met me!"

"Yeah," cheered all three of her companions.

"No," said a card guard standing outside her cell. "You are going to be a very tiny snack for the Jabberwock, and all of Wonderland is going to watch you die." His grin was as malevolent as any that she'd seen on the queen. On his chest was painted the number ten. "Open two thirty-eight!"

A group of at least ten guards tromped up behind him, clubs at the ready. Their wicked hum filled the air, telling Alice that if they touched her, they would give her that horrible jolt of pain. They weren't taking any chances tonight. The queen was nowhere to be seen.

Alice looked up to find a security camera that she was sure the queen was watching on and gave her best smile before stepping out with the guards. Lyla had made herself scarce, and was now nothing more than a spot of warmth pressed against her thigh through the cloth of her pocket.

Unlike her last march down the hall of the jail, this time there were two prisoners pressed against their cell walls to watch her pass. Seamus and March were in cells near the other end of the jail. Too far away to be seen or talked to from her own cell. Seeing them there sunk her heart all the way down to her toes. She didn't dare reach out to them or acknowledge them with more than a look, or her guards were sure to club her and probably them too. Already she could see the wildness in their eyes, the madness returning from too much time spent without their Tea.

Only a couple of hours ago, seeing them in those cells would have broken her, sending her into a spiral of depression and sobbing. Now, after her talk with the duchess and her newly found determination, seeing them trapped in this place because of her only stoked her fire further. She would survive this ordeal and she would find a way to rescue her friends.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The march to the elevator was awkward and the ride to the dock level of The Red Palace even more so. The guards didn't put away their clubs and they never let go of the pain buttons, so every move was a constant struggle not to accidentally take down one of their own or Alice. At one point there was a shout from the back of the elevator and the clatter of armor hitting the floor.

Alice did her best not to snicker. *All this trouble for one little girl*, she thought. It wasn't until she glanced around the elevator that she noticed most of the guards had bandaged injuries to their arms or legs. That time she did allow herself a small laugh. The guards pretended not to notice. These guards were the ones that she had defeated on her way out of The Red Palace the first time, and with that knowledge, she could see just how scared of her they were. She supposed little girls could be an awful lot of trouble after all. It was just the confidence boost she needed.

The elevator doors opened on the dock level and the guards ushered her out. They didn't go anywhere near The White Rabbit. Instead, they took a rather ordinary looking silver behemoth that could have held hundreds of soldiers. She was ushered to a seat and surrounded by guards, still clutching their batons with the pain button pressed.

The ride to the Imagisphere was uneventful, if quite a bit bumpier than their ride with The White Rabbit had been. Lyla stayed hidden away in Alice's pocket, wiggling every now and then, so Alice knew she was still well.

In a few minutes, the Imagisphere loomed large before them, its pale green atmosphere taking up most of the small window she could see from her seat. It looked perfectly calm and boring, but there was no telling what horrors waited inside it for her.

Upon landing, one of the cargo doors on the side of the ship opened and a brave guard took her by the arm and pushed her toward it. The rest clustered around and watched her walk down the ramp. None of them followed. As

soon as her foot left the ramp, the door closed and a blast of air blew, pushing her hair into her face. Just like that, the ship was gone and she was left alone. Well, probably not alone, but without guards.

Alice brushed the hair out of her face and surveyed the land around her. The Imagisphere had been transformed into a thick jungle. Massive trees covered in moss and vines loomed around her and below them was a wall of dense greenery that would be hard to even walk through. The clearing the ship had left her in wasn't much larger than the ship itself.

At the far end of the clearing, something glinted in the light. It was strange that there was daylight in the Imagisphere when it had been dark on the planet below. It made sense in several ways, not least of which because the whole moon-sized place could make itself appear any way it wanted, but it was still strange to see.

Having been given no instructions, Alice decided to stay out of the jungle for the time being. The longer she looked at it, the less inviting it was. Jungles were always talked about as dangerous places full of exotic animals and plants that could kill you with little more than a touch. If this was one the queen had designed, it was probably worse than that.

The sun glinted off the object at the far end of the clearing again, so she walked warily toward it. It was hard not to second guess every impulse she had. Knowing that the sole purpose of the landscape was to kill her had her literally jumping at shadows.

As she closed on the object it became clear what it was. A sword. And not just any sword, the vorpal sword. Her fear warred with her other emotions for control of her body. In the end, she threw caution to the wind and sprinted the last several meters to the sword. It was on a stand with its blade partially exposed so that it could catch the light. Obviously she was intended to find it. But why?

Now that she was standing within reach of the sword she became wary again. She remembered the energy field the sword had been housed in the first time she had seen it and sighed. There was no way the queen would give her such a powerful weapon if she wanted her to die. The sword was definitely a trap.

Alice huffed and slumped to the ground. She stared up at the sky, beseeching it for answers. She knew from her experience playing croquet that there were hundreds of cameras floating in the air that could chronicle everything that happened and feed it back to Wonderland.

The queen was watching her from somewhere down there and laughing at her petty little game. Alice just had to figure out how to beat her at it.

She looked back at the sword and then up toward the cameras. This wasn't any regular execution. If it was, she would have just been hauled out and had her head chopped off like a normal prisoner.

Still, there was no need to take too many chances and get herself killed.

On the ground, next to the stand the sword rested on, were a few small rocks and some leaves. Alice scooped them up and tossed a few pebbles at the sword. A couple of them hit their target and pinged off with no noticeable effect. So far so good. She decided to try the leaves as well, since they were living matter and might be more likely to be zapped by a force field that was meant to kill people. At least that's what she told herself.

She tried tossing a couple of the leaves that she wadded into balls, but they were too light and fell short.

A sound from the jungle halted her attempt to wrap a leaf around some pebbles. Alice strained her hearing for several seconds, but didn't hear anything further. Still, her hands were much less steady on her next attempt to bundle the leaf. Just when she about had it wrapped up, there was another sound, this one closer and a lot louder. There was no trying to write that one off as her imagination. It had clearly been something large moving through the trees.

The jungle was so dense that it was hard to figure out which direction the sound came from, even when it was repeated. Every turn of her head seemed to indicate a different direction. She wanted badly to believe that it was just a trick of sound and not that there were actually many things moving toward her from different directions.

Alice returned to her leaves and pebbles and worked as frantically as she could. Finally, she had a bundle that she thought would stay together long enough to test her theory. She held it up, took careful aim, and tossed it. A combination of poor coordination and jangling nerves sent it flying high over the sword. "Gaaah!" she howled in frustration.

The rustling was now a continuous sound, definitely coming from her right. It was almost on top of her.

Lyla popped up out of Alice's pocket and clambered up to her shoulder, sword drawn. "What is it, Alice?"

Alice let out a startled cry and nearly jumped out of her skin. She'd forgotten that Lyla had stowed away in her pocket. "Ohmygod, I forgot you

were in there. Something is coming from the jungle over there," said Alice pointing to her right. "And the vorpal sword is right there, but I'm too afraid that it's a trap to touch it."

The rustling sound grew to a deafening crash and a massive ball of fur and muscle bounded out of the jungle.

There was no more time for testing. Either she grabbed the sword and risked death from a force field, or she ran away, unarmed, from a frumious Bandersnatch. It wasn't much of a choice.

Alice snatched the vorpal sword from its perch and, finding herself still alive, darted off to her left and into the jungle. Only a few steps in, it was nearly impossible to go any further. Sharp leaves cut her face and brambles pulled at her clothes.

"Use the sword, Alice," shouted Lyla directly in her ear. Even then it was hard to hear her over the baying of the Bandersnatch on their trail.

Alice yanked the sword free of its scabbard and waved it in front of her, never slowing her progress. The Bandersnatch must have been having an even harder time of it because of its extreme size. Occasionally, at least, Alice could duck under a nasty tangle of branches. The Bandersnatch would have no such luxury. A single swipe from the sword sent branches tumbling to the ground and opened a path before her.

The sword sang joyously in her mind, obviously happy to be reunited. The reunion song was short-lived though, as the sword took stock of Alice's situation. The sword cautioned her against cutting too many branches. That would keep the Bandersnatch from being able to easily follow the same path she took. From then forward she paid careful attention and only cut down foliage that made it impossible for her to pass. She turned randomly, not wanting to give the creature a straight path to follow her on. After some time, her arm began to tire from swinging the sword so much.

"I think we've lost it for the time being," said Lyla, her small ears rotating this way and that. "I'm sure you must be growing tired. We should take a moment to rest."

Her breath was coming out in gasps. She hadn't even noticed. She nodded and slid the sword into its scabbard and finally took the time to belt it around her waist. Both of her hands ached from gripping so furiously while they fled. Once she had her sword belted on, she sat on a stump with a heavy sigh. "Bandersnatch again."

"Aye," said Lyla. She continued to pace back and forth on Alice's shoulder, her ears scanning for noises. "It was the same beast that we bested yesterday. It doesn't seem too happy to see us again."

"Do you think it really remembers us?" asked Alice.

"Certainly. Those things have incredible noses. It probably tracked us with your scent to begin with. If we don't keep moving, eventually it will sniff us out. Don't want to make too much noise either. They don't hear as well as I do, but they aren't deaf."

Alice stroked the hilt of the sword idly while she continued to catch her breath. The sword played through possible scenarios with her on how they could kill the Bandersnatch. They all seemed painfully familiar, as if she'd read them before. The more information she sifted through with the sword, the more familiar it became. She started to write it off as repeated information that the sword had told her before, then she recognized a particularly ridiculous move that played through her mind. It was something she'd seen in a pirate movie last year. It was tweaked so that it might be useful, but it was definitely the same move. "It doesn't know anything," said Alice. "It's just using all the stuff that's already in my head."

"Beg pardon?" asked Lyla, scratching her head.

"The sword," said Alice, swatting the hilt in disgust. "It doesn't know anything on its own. I thought it was telling me all of these amazing moves that had been programmed into it, but it's just been recycling all the stuff I've seen in movies or read in books. I think a large portion of the moves I've used so far were just ballet moves that I learned when I was little and my mother insisted I take classes. This thing is completely useless."

"It seems like it's served you pretty well so far," said Lyla. "You took down a bunch of the queen's guards and did it without killing any of them. That's ridiculously hard."

"I guess so," said Alice, not entirely convinced.

"No, I don't think you understand," said Lyla, a bit of an edge in her voice. "Most people would have been lucky to walk out of there alive, and that's if they were aiming to kill everyone who tried to stop them." She waited for Alice to really think about what she just said. When her eyes got round, she continued. "Yeah, now you're starting to understand. You walked out of there without a single scratch on that cute little head of yours. Do you think you could have done the same with any other sword in your hand?"

"No," admitted Alice. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment. Of course the sword had helped her get out of the palace. "Then why does it seem to be only showing me things I've seen before?"

"Don't ask me to puzzle out the programming the hatter put into anything he's made. It's nearly as mad as he is. But if I had to speculate, I'd say the sword is trying to show you things that you are somewhat familiar with. It can't make you move a certain way, so it blends what you already know with what it knows and finds the most effective way for you to fight."

"That sounds reasonable," said Alice. "I guess it probably knows moves that I could never do because of my size as well. It wouldn't do much good for it to show me those."

"Exactly," said Lyla. "Think of the sword as just a really competent teacher. It does its job so well that you barely realize that you're learning."

"I've been thinking," said Alice. She looked around at the jungle surrounding them. "We can't just keep running all night."

"True enough, though you're the one doing all the running. I'm just along for the ride." Lyla slapped her tiny paw down on Alice's shoulder.

"So, let's find a place to fight."

"Now that sounds like a plan that's more to my liking!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Bandersnatch snuffled its way along the trail that Alice had cut through the jungle. It was clear, wide, and straight as an arrow. The Bandersnatch didn't charge down it in a hurry, which indicated that it was rather intelligent.

Alice watched it come from her perch in a tree on the other side of the clearing. Lyla was somewhere below, winding her way through the underbrush.

Slowly and steadily the Bandersnatch made its way into the clearing which was much smaller than the one the ship had landed in, though still large enough to play a game of football in. It would sniff along the ground for a few feet and then hold its nose up in the air and look left and then right. If it weren't so big and bulky and didn't have that strange leathery tail it would look almost like a hunting dog. So, that is to say that it looked nothing like a hunting dog.

Alice watched intently as it took its time wandering around the clearing, still dense with brush that came up to Alice's knees. It finally made its way back in line with the patch she'd cut through the jungle just below the tree she was sitting in. "Now, Lyla," she whispered to herself. "Now."

A few terrible seconds passed and then a startling shriek came up out of the undergrowth just in front of the path. Alice clenched the sword tightly in both of her fists and held it at waist level, blade pointed down. The Bandersnatch charged after Lyla, who was making more noise than seemed possible for a creature of her tiny size. Everything was going according to plan. The vorpal sword yearned to bite into the flesh of such a wild and powerful creature.

Just before the Bandersnatch passed under her, Alice leaned forward and pushed herself off the branch and into the air. Her blade was pointed perfectly at the base of the beast's neck. It would die instantly. Unfortunately, the ragged hem of her shirt, where she had cut away the tiny skirt, caught on the tree. Jumping from over three meters in the air was a

big enough scare. The tugging sensation at her back caused her to jerk reflexively to try and protect herself from whatever had grabbed her. Too late, she realized it wasn't anything to worry about.

Alice hit its back with a resounding thud that sent stars dancing across her vision. The vorpal sword missed its mark by half a meter and opened a deep cut in the creature's shoulder and front leg. She tumbled off, clutching at her stomach, gasping for air that wouldn't come. It felt like she was dying. Maybe a rib had punctured a lung.

The Bandersnatch tumbled the other direction, smashing the foliage flat and flinging blood into the air. It let out an unearthly howl that normally would have had Alice covering her ears if she weren't so busy trying to pull air into her lungs. After several long seconds that felt like minutes, her stomach stopped convulsing and let her pull in a ragged breath.

Once she had air going to her brain again, she remembered she was in terrible danger. She canvased the area for the vorpal sword. It wasn't anywhere to be seen. The only spot she couldn't see was under the writhing Bandersnatch. It was rubbing its wounded shoulder into the dirt and yowling uncontrollably. For such a large, fearsome creature, it sure did cry a lot.

"Hey, ugly, over here!" called Alice as loud as she could manage with her still diminished lung capacity.

The Bandersnatch snarled and lunged at her, one giant paw swiping inches from her head when she dove to her right. She rolled and came up on her feet, her eyes searching the trampled ground where the Bandersnatch had rolled. Snicker-snack was right in the middle.

At a run, Alice snatched the hilt of the sword and brought it up in time to whirl around and swipe it at the beast's open maw. The blade let out a vicious snapping sound and lopped off one of the beast's huge upper fangs. The fang dropped to the ground and the Bandersnatch howled again in pain.

This time instead of lunging, it withdrew, limping heavily on its wounded front leg. It didn't seem to have any trouble with its rear leg or its hearing. Alice added impossibly quick healing to the creature's list of strengths.

Alice stood with her sword at the ready, waiting for the Bandersnatch to attack again. It pulled back further, favoring its front leg and glancing down at its tooth on the ground. Then it turned its gaze to Alice and licked the stub where the fang had been cut off, and whined. There was something very canine about the way it behaved.

"Finish it, Alice," called Lyla from an invisible position in the brush to her left.

Snicker-snack agreed and really, there was no reason to argue. The monster had been trying to kill her and had seriously injured Dee's arm the previous night. With Snicker-snack the end would be quick and nearly painless.

She raised the sword for a quick downward stroke to the creature's head. If it weren't for the vorpal sword's extraordinary ability to cut through bone like butter, her strength would never be enough.

The Bandersnatch watched her warily, its eyes darting back and forth from the sword to her face. It didn't try to flee, nor did it seem ready for an attack. It just waited.

Alice spared a quick glance up at the sky, cursing the queen for leaving her no choice, and then lunged. The vorpal sword arced through the air, making its trademark snicker-snack sound. A guttural cry escaped her lips. The Bandersnatch flinched backward, an instinctive reaction to avoid watching the blow that would end its life. Snicker-snack fed a quick correction to Alice to ensure that the blow would cleave the beast's skull. In that split second she made a decision. Instead of correcting, she deliberately altered the path of the blade in the other direction.

The sword hit the ground with a dull thud. The Bandersnatch let out a puff of breath that would have been called a sigh if it were human. It looked up at Alice with one brow raised.

"What are you doing?" complained Lyla. "Kill it before it gets its senses back and eats you whole."

Alice looked the Bandersnatch in the eyes. There didn't seem to be any malice, only pain and defeat. "I can't kill it."

"If you need me to do it, I can. I know it's hard to kill for the first time, especially when you're so young." Lyla stepped out of the tangle of undergrowth, her sword held in front of her.

"No, that's not it," said Alice. "I don't think it really wants to kill us. At least not any more."

"That's all a Bandersnatch does, Alice."

"Well, if that's true, then why is it sitting there and licking its wound instead of eating my face off?"

The Bandersnatch was now completely ignoring them, absorbed in licking the wound on its shoulder and leg. The only way it could have

seemed more docile was if it had rolled over on its back and whined to have its belly rubbed.

"What in the world?" asked Lyla. She lowered her sword and scratched her head. "This has to be some sort of trick."

"Yeah, it's so smart that its leaving itself wide open to a death blow in order to lick us to death when we're least expecting it."

Lyla shrugged. The sarcasm seemed completely lost on her. "Everything I've ever heard about them says they kill indiscriminately. They're one of the few wild beasts that kills for sport, rather than just to protect itself or for food."

While they stood there and talked, the wound on its shoulder had actually knitted itself back together. In a few more minutes, it seemed likely that it would disappear completely. It continued to ignore them, its tongue making loud smacking sounds.

"Didn't the twins say something about them being extinct, though?" asked Alice.

"Yeah, they were all supposed to have been gone for several years. I'd never actually seen one in person until yesterday." Lyla frowned and looked up at Alice. "Why?"

"What if this isn't a Bandersnatch at all?" asked Alice.

"That doesn't make any sense, Alice. I may not have seen one in person, but I've seen hundreds of pictures and read about them. This thing is a Bandersnatch." Lyla slid her sword into the scabbard on her back and crossed her arms.

"A Bandersnatch that understood that it had lost a fight and allowed me to swing a sword at its head without trying to stop me?"

Lyla nodded a few times and then switched to shaking her head. "This isn't adding up, you're right."

"I think the queen has somehow made a beast that looks like a Bandersnatch so that she can scare people with it. This thing seems to be more like a dog than anything else." Alice looked at the Bandersnatch and gave it her biggest smile. "Who's a good boy?"

The Bandersnatch cocked its head to the side, its tongue lolling out.

"Who's a good boy?" repeated Alice, roughening her tone in that way that all dogs seemed to enjoy.

The Bandersnatch wagged its massive tale and stepped forward, only hobbling slightly on its quickly healing leg. Once it was within arm's reach,

it laid down on the ground and pushed its broad head up beneath Alice's hand. Lyla stood off to the side and watched, her jaw dropped in amazement while Alice rubbed the beast's ear.

From over head came the howl of engines and a gust of wind. In between one blink and another the jungle around them disappeared, leaving only a flat grassy field. The ship that had dropped Alice on the Imagisphere settled to the ground and out poured several dozen card guards, each holding a buzzing club in their hands.

The Bandersnatch licked Alice's arm when she stopped rubbing his ears and whined. Alice ignored him and raised her sword with a grin. "I guess I've annoyed the queen enough for one evening?" she guessed.

"You are to drop your weapon so that you can be returned to your cell until the queen has need for you again," said a guard wearing the number ten.

"And if she doesn't?" asked Lyla, her own sword pointed and at the ready.

The guard looked around in confusion for the source of the voice and, not seeing Lyla, looked to Alice and answered. "Then we are authorized to use force to make you submit."

"I didn't hear the word lethal in there," said Alice. "Judging by that and the fact that none of you have your swords out, I'd say it's going to be a rough time for you." She swished the sword in front of her and it issued forth a snick-snack-snack.

The Bandersnatch heaved its bulk to its feet and turned to face the guards. It looked from them, to Alice and back. The hackles on the back of its neck raised and a low growl rumbled in its throat.

"And it looks like Ugly here isn't too happy with you for interrupting petting time, either," said Alice. The lower ranked guards looked uncertain and more than a few started to lower their clubs and glance back at their ship.

The vorpal sword sang loudly in Alice's mind, pointing her toward the weaker targets and prompting her to completely disable or kill any enemy as fast as she could. This time she didn't disagree. The more of them she got rid of, the better her odds would be to make an escape later. She had no illusions that this would be her chance. She was outnumbered dozens to one. Eventually one of them would hit her with a club and the pain would take her down, but not before she took a bunch of them out.

Number Ten just glared at her, not bothering to argue. “Guards, capture her,” he shouted, and charged forward.

Snicker-snack kicked her song into overdrive, singing a fast-paced tune Alice remembered from one of her most demanding ballet recitals. Automatically, her feet moved to the music. A jump here to avoid a club aimed at her knees, followed by an artful wave of her hand that bit into another guard’s neck, sending a spray of blood across her side. Snicker-snack altered her dance moves just enough to make every one either a lethal blow or an artful dodge.

A pair of guards charged at her in unison, one from the front and one from the rear. Alice waited for them to come and then dropped into the splits just before their blows made contact. They ended up striking each other instead. While they stood there shaking from the pain of their clubs, Alice slashed at their guts and disemboweled them before rolling to the side and coming to her feet.

Lyla passed through the guards mostly unnoticed, unless she was slashing a throat. Then a guard would begin clubbing his fallen comrade who was still dying from blood loss in a sad attempt to get the dormouse.

The Bandersnatch wasn’t nearly as subtle. He barreled through the guards, grabbing them in snapping jaws and tossing them to the side crumpled and broken. Jolts from their clubs barely seemed to slow him down.

Still, despite their victories, the guards continued to fill in around them. One pirouette from Alice with her sword arm extended took out six guards who were immediately replaced by just as many, this time half of them keeping low to the ground and striking at her knees. There was no way to take them all out. One swipe took off the club arm of a guard in front of her and he toppled into his neighbor, leaving an opening in the enclosing circle.

Alice dove for it and tucked herself into a ball. Snicker-snack pressed into her side, but the cold metal did her no harm. Then a searing pain lit her leg on fire. A guard had managed to get the slightest blow to land on her calf as she pulled herself back to her feet. She crumbled back to the ground in a graceless heap, her left leg completely useless.

Her brain told her this was the end. Any second another blow would come to knock her completely senseless. Her body wasn’t ready to quit though. Her arms burned with exertion and her eyes were almost crusted shut with

other people's blood. Even though she knew they weren't going to kill her, this was still a fight for survival. She would give it all that she had.

Snicker-snack sang her agreement. The battle wasn't done until you weren't able to continue or until the last enemy was slain. Together they worked out a floor routine that cut the legs out from under several more guards.

Lyla could be heard shouting a battle cry that moved ever closer to Alice's position and Bandy, as she'd dubbed him, was still howling and snarling, though much more hoarsely.

Just one more, she kept telling herself. They aren't endless. Eventually you will have killed them all and you'll have to figure out how to fly the ship with only a rodent and a mutated dog for crew. That thought brought about a wild fit of laughter which scared off a few of the lower ranking cards. Nobody could blame them; a girl sitting on the ground, covered in blood and dicing up enemy after enemy while howling with laughter was a disturbing sight.

Then one of her enemies toppled before she had a chance to cut him down and Lyla appeared next to his head when he hit the ground. Together the two of them stemmed the tide of card guards for another couple of minutes while Bandy continued his rampage within earshot.

Guard after guard threw himself at Alice and Lyla, only to join his comrades on the mounting pile of bodies around them. To their left, Bandy let out a horrible cry and then went silent. Apparently he'd fallen, because a new influx of guards hit them from that side.

The pain in her leg had subsided enough that Alice managed to stand. It was a mistake. No sooner had she reached her full height than a guard pushed over the pile of bodies and tangled her feet. They took full advantage of her momentary loss of balance and several blows rained down on her at once. Each one was like being stabbed with an electrified red hot poker. Every muscle in her body spasmed and then went so taut that she couldn't even fall to the ground. Sparks and red blotches filled her vision and then, still on her feet, she lost consciousness.

She slipped in and out of awareness while they carried her onto the ship. She didn't want to be awake. Every time she would drift off she would startle and her eyes would pop open. Something was missing. She had to get it. No, that wasn't right. She knew Snicker-snack would be taken, she

wasn't important. Someone! Someone was missing. Lyla. She had to find Lyla.

"Shhh, I'm here, Alice. Don't fret. Go back to sleep. No need to call out," said a small husky voice.

She wasn't calling out. The only thing she could hear was a frantic muling sound, probably poor Bandy. She tried to argue with Lyla and found that her mouth was already in use. Her throat was raw. Then she realized that muling sound was actually her.

"All is well Alice," said Lyla. "I won't let them hurt you any more."

That time Alice realized that Lyla was actually curled up under the edge of her shirt on her shoulder. She wasn't lost, so Alice let darkness claim her again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Turbulence shook Alice awake, just as they were circling The Red Palace to come in for a landing. Her muscles ached from all the clenching, and she had a terrible headache, but otherwise she seemed to be intact.

She was slumped into a seat near a window with two guards staring down at her nervously. "Boo!" she said, and they jumped back, nearly dropping their clubs. Alice couldn't help laughing, even though it caused her immediate muscle pain.

Outside her window loomed the digital billboard that rested atop the palace. It showed a picture of a card guard standing next to the queen with his sword held in a fighting pose. "Join the palace guard today! Immediate openings in a number of prestigious positions!" it proclaimed.

"If they televised what just happened, I'm not sure those positions are going to be so easy to fill," said Alice.

"Shut your mouth," grumped one of the guards. "I lost a lot of friends hauling your arse back in here."

"Then you might want to blame the queen for that. She's the one that only gave you those short little clubs to bring in someone wielding a sword that cuts through metal as well as air," said Alice smugly. "I bet there are any number of high tech guns she could have given you that could have knocked me out at a hundred meters."

"It's not for us to question the queen's orders," said the other guard in the seat across from her. His chest was painted with the number four.

"Good job, Number Four. Said like a good little soldier who will get himself killed in just the way his queen wants."

The other guard reached over with his club and jabbed her in the ribs, sinking her back into oblivion.

When she woke the next time, she'd been returned to her cell. They hadn't bothered to put her on her cot. The floor was cold and hard, pressing against her aching body in a hundred unpleasant ways. "Aaaaugh," she groaned.

"Oh, Alice," said Dee excitedly. "You put on such a great show. There was blood everywhere. If they'd had just a few less guards, I think you could have won the day."

"Blech," responded Alice. Her tongue tasted like she'd spent the night licking dirty ashtrays while holding a mouth full of pennies.

"Leave her alone, Dee," Dum chided. "She's bound to be in plenty of pain. The jerks didn't even bother to put her on her cot."

Alice found a glass of water next to her cot and took a drink. "Can't blame them," she said. "I did just kill a good deal of them." Her mind swam with the images of blood and other less pleasant things. She could barely believe it was her that had done such violence. She wouldn't change anything though. If she had to kill a thousand of them to have a chance at saving her friends, she'd do it. That's when she remembered that Seamus and March were in the jail as well. Five of her friends' lives were depending on her.

"You really did give them a good stomping," said Dee. He seemed really and truly proud.

Alice took another sip of her water and smiled at Dee. "You would have done better."

"D'aw," said Dee, his cheeks turning red. "You've barely even seen me fight, and your puppy nearly took off my arm."

"Wait a minute," said Alice. She looked around the room in confusion. "How did you guys see me fight?"

"Turns out these walls are a lot more high tech than they look." Dum tapped the cell wall. "When they dumped you off in the Imagisphere, every cell in here had a huge screen to watch you on."

"What about Lyla and Bandy?" asked Alice. "Are they all right?"

"Bandy?" asked Dum. "Oh, the Bandersnatch. They didn't kill it. Nice job turning it to your side, by the way. Nobody could have predicted that one."

"Ugggh," groaned Lyla from a shadow underneath Alice's cot. "Hurt everywhere."

Alice scooted along the floor to Lyla, every muscle screaming in protest. Her skin itched where dried blood coated it and cracked. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, no thanks to you," groaned the dormouse. She stretched and yawned, showing her tiny teeth in the cutest way.

Alice tried not to smile, and failed. "Thanks to me? What ever did I do?"

“The next time you feel the urge to taunt the guards and get hit with one of those nasty clubs, make sure I’m far away.” She scowled up at Alice who smiled even wider.

“Oh, Lyla, I’m so sorry! I didn’t realize it would go through me and hit you too.”

“Well, it did,” groused the dormouse. “But I think you might have opened their eyes a bit to the fact that the queen doesn’t really care about their lives.”

“How’s that, then?” asked Dum.

Alice recounted seeing the billboard and taunting the guards for him. He grinned and Dee clapped for her. “That was worth a good jolt. Maybe you’ll get a few of them to abandon their posts.”

“That was my thinking. If we’re going to escape from here, having as few guards as possible around seemed like a good plan.”

“Do you have a plan for how to get out of here then?” asked Dum.

Alice looked down at Lyla and grinned. “I just might, if I can persuade Lyla to do a little running from cell to cell. Our friend Seamus is just down the hall and I think he could be a great help.”

After several hours of communication back and fourth through Lyla, a plan was in place. There was serious doubt as to whether the hatter could pull it off or not as his mental state had seriously declined since being imprisoned. At one point Lyla said he’d tried to set her in a maze he’d made from his shirt and told her to find her way to the cheese. Even if Seamus did manage to pull it off, there was still no guarantee that anything would come of it.

In any event, all there was to do was wait. Whether it was to be hauled off to the Imagisphere for another battle to the death, or whether it was for her escape plan to take shape.

“You really should try and get some more sleep, Alice,” said Dum. He sat on his cot and leaned against the plastic wall that divided their cells.

“I can’t sleep until I know whether or not he’s going to show up,” said Alice. “If he does, we need to be alert and ready to go.”

“He might not show up for days,” said Dum. His eyes drooped closed and then he jerked and sat up a little straighter. “You can never predict what that guy will do. He could be here already, just waiting to make a grand entrance.”

“That’s not fair,” said a wry voice. It was too clear to have come from anywhere but inside Alice’s cell. “I’m not prone to theatrics. I just don’t like doing what’s expected.”

“Cheshire,” said Alice in a whisper. “You got our message.”

“Yes, and I hardly think it amusing that you replaced all the commercials with Alice brand catnip ads.” A disapproving frown appeared at head height. “The other subtle hints placed all throughout the programming were quite enough to get my attention. No need to taunt me with my genetic predisposition to roll around in that bothersome plant.”

The thought of Cheshire rolling around on the floor like her cat Dinah with catnip was too funny and Alice burst out laughing. When he was visible, Cheshire always had a dignified air about him. His eyes appeared above his smile so that he could give her a disapproving glare. “Sorry,” said Alice, covering her mouth, still unable to stifle her giggle. She’d have to thank Seamus for working his wizardry through the prison wall televisions.

“Well, if you called me here simply to laugh at me, then I guess you’ve got what you wanted. I’ll just be on my way.” The cat’s mouth and eyes drifted slowly toward the door of the cell. “I love what they’ve done with this place. Very modern for a prison. I can see why you fancy a nice long stay here. Too bad you’ll be dead within a couple of days.”

“Please, wait,” called Alice, finally getting her giggling under control. Mention of one’s inevitable demise tends to have that effect. “I need your help. We all need your help.”

“Well, that much is obvious,” sniffed Cheshire. Between one second and the next he was a whole person, dressed in a simple pair of black pants and a black shirt. He sat down on the bench next to Alice and looked off into the distance. To a casual observer it would appear that he didn’t care in the least what she might say to him, then he nodded slightly.

Alice took that as a sign that she should explain, so she started by asking a simple question. “Were you just being boastful before, or could you really steal the vorpal sword from the queen’s collection room?”

“I don’t boast,” said Cheshire, turning his nose up. “I can steal anything from anyone.”

“Good, then I need to you to steal the vorpal sword before night falls and the queen dumps me in the Imagisphere again.” The statement came out so bold and presumptuous that she felt the need to follow it up with a polite request. “Would you be willing to do that for me?” Cheshire’s silence

prompted her to continue. “I don’t really have much to offer you in the way of payment, I’m afraid. I would owe you a tremendous debt.”

“I’d do that just for the fun of it, Alice,” said Cheshire. He turned his head to meet her gaze and gave her his trademark grin. “I’d love to see you tear out of this place again with that sword in hand and thumb your nose at that awful queen.”

“Great,” said Alice, clapping her hands. “Let’s get started. I imagine they’ll be fetching me out of here again soon.”

Cheshire frowned and lowered his head. “I wish it were that easy. I could steal the vorpal sword from her treasure room, but it would take days or possibly weeks of planning.”

Alice slumped down onto her cot and heaved a great sigh. “And here I thought I was so clever getting Seamus to call you up here. We’ll all be dead in a few days if I’m being honest with myself. If Bandy wouldn’t have joined our side, we’d have been doomed last night.”

“All is not lost, dear Alice. Let me talk some things over with you and I may just have a plan.” His beautiful yellow eyes flashed with mischief.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The second trip to the Imagisphere was a very different affair. There were an impossible number of guards packed onto the ship that carried her. Every one that Alice could see was visibly nervous. Most of them had the two of hearts painted on their armor. New recruits who had obviously seen the previous attempt to get her back on the ship. It made her smile. She was a dreaded pirate at last. Lyla rode in the open on her shoulder and nobody bothered to try and stop her.

The Imagisphere itself was like nothing Alice had ever seen. There was no speck of green within view. The ship dropped her in a canyon of black rock. Huge spires of the black stone stuck up like impossibly large spearheads piercing the red sky. The sun couldn't be seen, despite the seeming perpetual twilight and complete lack of cloud cover. Nothing about the place seemed to even try to mimic a real landscape.

"Well, this is welcoming," quipped Lyla. "I think I'll move into that cave over there, as soon as I clear out the horde of man-sized flesh-eating bats that surely live in it."

"At least they did give me the sword again," said Alice, pointing.

The vorpal sword sat on a pedestal of the black rock about thirty meters away. Far enough away that the ship could be easily away before she had a chance to get to it. Not that she had even intended to try and assault the ship. It was long gone before she had even noticed the sword.

"That's some cold comfort," said Lyla. "There isn't even a way to get out of this dreadful black bowl."

The rock walls around them were mostly smooth except for the cave that Lyla had pointed out. The rock pillars were large enough to provide some shelter to duck behind, but not really a hiding place. The rocky ground rose and fell to create a labyrinth of smaller chasms that could serve as hiding places if it became necessary, though they were just as likely to be great ways to fall to ones death if they weren't paying attention. At its highest point, the floor of the canyon didn't get closer to the rim than about a

hundred meters. It was probably about three times that length. The queen wanted them contained this time and had gone to pains to make it happen.

Alice walked over and retrieved the sword, not bothering with tests for traps this time. It was obvious that the queen wanted a show put on for her subjects, not just a quick execution. She swung the sword a couple of times, delighting in the sound it made and listening to the song inside her head. If Snicker-snack knew anything of what they would face, she stayed silent on the topic.

Almost as if on cue, an earsplitting roar echoed through the canyon. Alice covered her ears, but it didn't make a difference. The sound pushed against her senses like the air pressure when you took off in a ship or went up into the mountains. There was definitely an audible component, but it was the least terrible part. The roar seemed to stretch into infinity, as if it were all the sound there ever was and ever would be. As it continued there were layers and layers that revealed themselves, some as quiet as whispers that seemed to come from just behind you, no matter which way you turned, others that were so huge and oppressive that you longed to shove something in your ear to make it stop. Each new layer stacked on top of the others, every one still heard clearly. None of them waned.

There was no doubt that this was a psychic assault as well as a physical one. That could only mean one thing.

The Jabberwock.

Armed with that knowledge, Alice closed her eyes and did her best to concentrate. There had to be a way to beat a psychic attack, just like there were physical attacks, no matter how overwhelming they seemed. That's when she remembered that her hand still held Snicker-snack. If the sword was able to talk to her mind to teach her fighting techniques and sort out subterfuge, then it should be able to help with this.

Her mind had drifted far from the concept of body during the psychic assault. It was a battle just to remember what it felt like to hold the hilt of the sword in her hand. Bit by bit she remembered the soft feel of the leather wrapped metal grip that felt like it was molded for her hand, and the comforting weight of the sword slicing through the air.

Once she had a good mental picture of the look and feel of the sword in her hand it was time to reach out to it mentally. The whispers of the Jabberwock's attack mocked her cruelly. They told her that she was just a weak little girl that should consider herself lucky just to be a snack for such

a noble creature as the Jabberwock. It filled her mind with all the childish insults that had been hurled at her in school. Her parents shook their heads in disappointment; if only she'd been a good young lady and become a doctor. Even Anna joined in, taunting her about the size of her chest and how no boys would ever like her because she looked just like one of them. Then the queen joined in with a chorus of, "Off with her head!".

The words washed over her like a flash flood, threatening to carry her away. Then, through the torrent, came a single mournful note that somehow conveyed both concern and hope. That single note built into a whole chorus of praise and compliments, followed by sword thrusts set to music. Snicker-snack practically babbled with a list of commands and movements.

Alice followed them instinctually, her eyes not yet focused. It saved her life. A blast of hot air washed over her head as she ran forward and tucked into a roll. The heat was so intense she was sure that her hair was singed. The sword stayed in her grip and didn't let go of her mind. Orders were shouted at top volume in order to block out the press of the Jabberwock's psychic attack.

Out of the roll and back to her feet, Alice spun in time to see the Jabberwock beat its leathery wings and arc toward the rim of the canyon. Lyla still clung to Alice's shoulder, her teeth bared in a snarl.

"Are you all right, Lyla?"

"Will be shortly. I wasn't ready for that hit. Still has my head spinning a bit. I've had lots of practice fighting off that thing's attacks, so I should be fine from here on out. Thankfully it doesn't seem to bother us small folks as much as you larger types." Lyla shook her head and then looked Alice up and down. "How did you manage to fare so well, anyway?"

"Snicker-snack," said Alice. "It can help me shield my mind." She held the sword aloft and glared at the Jabberwock who had perched on a spire on the edge of the canyon. It wrapped itself around the jutting rock like a snake. Its dark-blue, scaly hide made it almost invisible when it settled its bat-like wings against its body. A gout of orange flame erupted from its mouth along with another of its strange roars.

Alice cringed at the sound, but it was nothing more than an annoying metallic screech with the sword taking precedence in her mind. The heat from the flame was enough to warm her cheeks, even from this distance. If it hadn't been for Snicker-snack, she and Lyla would have been reduced to a pile of bubbling goo.

"How am I supposed to kill that thing?" asked Alice. She shivered under the cold regard of the Jabberwock. It didn't seem angry any more than a lion is when it misses a chance to take down a gazelle. It just seemed determined, and hungry.

"I haven't the faintest bloody idea," said Lyla. "You won't be making friends with that beast though, I can tell you that. You would be just as likely to make friends with a hurricane or an avalanche. All it knows is destruction."

Lyla's expression grew distant and pained, reminding Alice that it was the Jabberwock that destroyed her family. The thought of losing her mother and father struck home and it was all she could do to stifle a sympathetic sob. She wanted nothing more than to hug her tiny friend and tell her that she would avenge her family with her, but Lyla was too small for hugs and the Jabberwock chose that time to launch itself into the air.

Alice took off running before she even realized where she was going. Small rocks and holes threatened to turn her ankle at every step. Fighting the craggy landscape was a battle in itself. Behind her she could already hear the beating of the Jabberwock's wings as it bore down on her. The cave was too far away for her to make it before they were intercepted. The only question was, would the monster use its flame this time, or come in to snap her up with its powerful jaws? All the while she ran, possible scenarios flashed through her head about how to avoid death for just another minute, another second.

Jaws snapped just behind her with a sound like boulders colliding. Before her loomed a wide crack in the rocks that was too wide to jump. If she stopped or slowed at all, both her and Lyla were dead. There was little choice. Alice pushed herself harder, running as fast as she was able.

"What are you doing, Alice?" asked Lyla, her voice frantic.

"If I slow down, that thing is going to have us."

"You can't jump that far."

"I know," said Alice. She gritted her teeth and pushed herself to run faster, though her legs were burning.

"But you don't know how far it iiiis doooooown." Lyla's last words were drawn out as they launched out into a yawning abyss.

Alice raised Snicker-snack before her in a two handed grip just as she pushed off from the near side of the fissure. As Lyla had pointed out, she couldn't jump nearly far enough to land on the ground on the other side.

Time seemed to slow down. As they plummeted, the rock wall on the far side loomed closer and closer. A collision was imminent and it was going to be painful. The tip of the vorpal sword hit the wall first and bit into the rock with a deafening screech and then continued to sink in until only the hilt remained outside of the cliff face. Alice rebounded off the hilt when it jabbed her sharply in the chest, but somehow managed to hold on. The sword had absorbed the bulk of the impact as it drove into the rock. At least that's what it told her. Otherwise it probably would have broken her sternum. The wings of the Jabberwock beat warm air down on her as it passed harmlessly overhead.

Now she hung precariously from the hilt of a sword, some ten meters down from the edge of a rock cliff.

"You'll have to pardon me," said Lyla. "I think I may have made a bit of a mess on your shirt, Alice."

Despite their compromised position, Alice had to laugh. "If that's the worst that happens to me today, I'll count myself lucky. Do you think you can climb this wall?"

The rock wasn't nearly as smooth on the cliff face as it was on the ground above, thankfully. It was pitted and pocked with small dents where chips of rock had fallen away.

"Not a problem, why?" asked Lyla.

"You should climb up on your own then, in case I don't make it."

"I'll hear nothing of the sort, young lady," groused Lyla. "You're climbing out of here if I have to pull you by the nose."

As nice a thought as that was, Alice wasn't at all sure she could make it and she wasn't about to take Lyla down with her if she didn't have to. "I'd love to keep you on my shoulder, but I think you might serve me better if you scouted for hand and foot holds above me."

Lyla debated the words for a moment as if she might argue and then nodded and scurried up Alice's arm and onto the rock wall. "Lift your feet just a touch and you should be able to find a tiny ledge to rest them on," said Lyla.

Her keen eyes certainly would prove useful, even if that wasn't the real reason why Alice wanted her on the wall. Alice followed her instructions and rested the bulk of her weight on her feet. The vorpal sword whispered a careful song in her head, showing her the way to slide the sword a bit higher and to one side in the rock. It was a delicate balancing act that kept the

sword anchored enough to hold her weight and still able to move in the rock. A slight hesitation when her balance shifted caused the sword to stick instead of gliding smoothly through the rock. If she lost her focus any worse than that, she would plummet to her death.

Lyla continued to call out hand and foot holds as she found them and they made slow progress up and toward Alice's right. All of her muscles burned. She longed to lean back and stretch out, but Snicker-snack urged her to keep her chest as close to the wall as she could manage.

Alice reached and pulled with the sword over and over again, marveling at the ease with which it cleaved solid rock. Seamus truly was a wizard and she owed him her life at least three times over. Her thoughts turned to freeing her friends. There was no way that she would consider leaving The Red Palace if all of them weren't with her. Impossible as it was, plotting their grand escape seemed a much smaller challenge at the moment.

The top of the cliff gradually came into view, one strained reach at a time. Her arms were on fire and the leather grip on the sword was slippery with her sweat. She groaned loudly with each pull to a new height.

"Come on, Alice, you're almost there," called Lyla. She was on the edge of the cliff in relative safety.

A harsh shriek pierced the air and shattered Alice's concentration. Her foot missed the ledge that Lyla had directed her to and she dropped to the full extension of her arms, swinging like a pendulum from the hilt of the sword. "Argh!" she cried, fighting to maintain control of her own thoughts and control the sword's tension in the rock while the psychic assault of the Jabberwock beat against her consciousness. The pale red light of the sky above began to fade to black.

"Alice," shouted Lyla. "Stay with me. Think of your family. Use them to help you push through. Fight for them."

Her words cut through the darkness, but not in the way that she meant them to. It was obvious that she had called out the first thing that came to her mind when she told Alice to fight. Her plea was for her own passion and it reminded Alice that she still deserved to have her vengeance. Yes, she wanted to see her parents again, to live and do so many important things with her life, but in that moment she fought for Lyla and her lost family. It was feeling Lyla's pain in those words that allowed her to fight against the Jabberwock's roar and find her footing on the rock wall. A few tortuous

pulls later and she was again on solid ground, her breath burning her throat like the Jabberwock's fire.

The beast circled high over their heads, snarling and snapping its jaws in anticipation of making them its next meal. There was no time for rest, no matter how badly she needed it. Alice heaved herself to her feet and Lyla resumed her perch on her shoulder. The cave wasn't far. Again she lurched into a run, her feet dragging awkwardly at times due to their exhaustion. There was no guarantee that the cave offered any true respite from the Jabberwock, but the only way she could continue to fight through the pain was to make it a bastion of hope.

Inside, she imagined that Bandy waited to fight the Jabberwock while she recovered her strength and made a plan to defeat the impossible foe. There was a warm bed for her to collapse into that somehow the Jabberwock couldn't reach or burn with its fire. If only she could just reach that cave.

The Jabberwock bore down on them with single-minded determination, its jaws open. Deep in its throat was a smoldering pit of coals that burst into impossible flames. They came to devour her as she ran.

The gout of flame hit the mouth of the cave just as Alice flung herself headlong inside, a combination of jump and stumble that resulted in rock scraping most of her body raw. Her feet were hot from the flames that walled off the cave like an orange curtain. She scrambled further into the cave where shadows danced and flickered in the eerie orange glow.

Finally the flames abated, leaving the rock in the mouth of the cave steaming. The wall of heat pushed Alice to her feet and further into the cave, which strangely didn't grow any darker. It actually began to take on a light green glow.

"We shouldn't stay in here," said Lyla. "If the Jabberwock wants to kill us, all it has to do is keep blasting fire into this cave and it will cook us alive."

The cave was just tall enough that Alice wouldn't bump her head in most places, far too small for the Jabberwock to come in after them. "I don't think it will do that. It wants to eat me. If it just wanted to kill me, it would have just burned me up while I was out there in the open." A burst of flame roared through the cave and Alice jumped into an alcove just in time to avoid being roasted. "Or maybe not."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The heat inside the cave was growing unbearable. Every time Alice peeked toward the entrance she saw the Jabberwock's glowing orange eyes staring them down, followed by another shot of flame. It was obvious that Alice's first assumption was right and that the Jabberwock was just trying to lure them out. That didn't mean it wouldn't kill them accidentally in the mean time. The cave came to an abrupt end just past the alcove they hid in, about fifteen meters from the entrance, so there was no escape. Whatever plant or animal had been providing the glow when they first entered the cave must have died in the flames because the cave was now smothered in complete darkness except for the dim red light from outside.

"We can't just stay here, and running out is a death sentence," said Alice.

"There was another alcove a few meters back, I think we could make it there before we got roasted," said Lyla.

"And then what?"

"Then we make a plan from there. At least it's better than just sitting here and waiting to die."

Alice peeked around the corner and instead of focusing on the Jabberwock at the mouth of the cave, scanned the walls looking for a darker area that would indicate the opening. Her head remained exposed longer than usual and the Jabberwock held back its blast of flame.

Snicker-snack sang loudly in her mind that it was a trap and Alice couldn't argue the fact. "I see the other alcove on the opposite side of the cave. It's only a few meters back."

"And being that we're not getting the oven treatment right now, I think it's safe to assume that the Jabberwock will let us run closer to its gullet unimpeded," said Lyla bitterly.

"Yes, it wants us to come closer," agreed Alice. "But like you said, it's not like we have any better options back here."

"True enough. When you go, you run like you're on fire and that alcove is the only water around for a thousand kilometers."

Alice nodded, took a deep steadyng breath, and checked her grip on the vorpal sword. "You ready?" she asked Lyla.

"Ready to show that thing the pointy end of my sword. Let's go."

Unable to find anything more to delay herself, Alice turned and bolted down the cave. It may have been only a few meters, but it felt like a thousand. Each step echoed like the ticking of an enormous clock that was counting down the seconds left of her life. The orange eyes at the end of the tunnel glinted with malice and then disappeared behind the gaping maw with a dual row of teeth larger than any she had ever seen, even in a museum.

Alice knew it was the end when she could see the flame kindled in the back of the Jabberwock's throat. All that would be left of her and Lyla would be a smoldering pile of ashes and sizzling fat. There was nothing to be done other than running with all the speed she could muster, so that's what she did.

The Jabberwock didn't burn them alive. Instead, it forced its gargantuan head through the cave opening, sheering stalactites and stalagmites from the ceiling and floor as it came, jaws snapping. They weren't going to burn, they were going to be chewed a couple of times and then slid down that thing's gullet to have their broken bodies burned alive in its stomach acid.

Ever closer it pushed and heaved, its serpentine body writhing to allow it to force another meter. Its claws raked horrible rents in the side of the cave with a sound like the collapse of a skyscraper.

Despite the Jabberwock's efforts, Alice ducked into the narrow alcove just before the beast's jaws reached it. Alice pushed herself as far back into the claustrophobic space as she could and then turned to watch the approach of their demise.

The Jabberwock's jaws snapped over and over again, leaving little to be seen in the main part of the cave other than its yellowed teeth and the armor-thick hide around its mouth. Precious seconds ticked away while it writhed and tried to turn its head to push into the little alcove they cowered in.

"How do we get out of here?" asked Alice in a hoarse whisper.

The Jabberwock's writhing slowed and the stench of its breath filled her nostrils. The smell was the overwhelming reek of burnt meat. It coated her throat and stung her eyes.

"It seems to be stuck. You could cut off its fool head with that sword of yours and then we could crawl out of here."

Snicker-snack urged caution and Alice agreed. "It could be a trick, but I don't see any other options."

Alice raised her sword arm and lunged forward, a feint that would have been obvious to another sword fighter. Suddenly, the Jabberwock's head turned at an impossible angle and was meeting them head on. It had them easily if it wanted to burn them. Alice adjusted her lunge to a horizontal swipe and lobbed off a portion of the Jabberwock's upper lip before retreating as far into her crevice as she could. The Jabberwock roared.

Black blood spread down its teeth. The ugly chunk of flesh quivered on the cave floor. A wave of psychic power washed over Alice. It bombarded her senses. Despite the presence of Snicker-snack in her mind keeping her focused, it was all she could do to keep her feet. A profound feeling of loss and hopelessness pressed into her chest, leaving no room for the beating of her heart. The tip of the sword drooped and made a hollow ringing sound as it bounced off the rock. Nothing in the world would ever be all right again. All that was left for her was to curl into a ball and hold her chest until the end came. Snicker-snack poured thoughts and emotions over her in a relentless torrent, trying to break the Jabberwock's hold. They pinged uselessly away from the hardened bubble of sadness that surrounded her. Nobody would ever caress her hair in the loving way her mother did when she put her to bed at night. She would never see pride in someone's eyes when she mastered a difficult task. Her life had been reduced to the cold hard rock that enfolded her on three sides and would be her tomb if the Jabberwock never made it in to finish her.

Those things were her only truth until she felt the warm touch of a small furry body pressed against her cheek. It was curiously wet around its face. It trembled slightly, but it was a warm body pressed to hers in a final gesture of comfort before the end. She felt her heart warm momentarily, like the sun breaking through the clouds in the midst of a bitter winter storm.

Then Lyla was gone and her heart sank.

Realization of a truth much more horrible than the forced depression of the Jabberwock's psychic attack washed over her like a bucket of ice water. There was only one reason Lyla would leave her shoulder.

"No!" shouted Alice, her vision clearing just in time to see Lyla's tiny form disappear under the Jabberwock's gaping jaws, too small to be seen

and attacked.

There was nothing to be done.

From out in the cave her tiny voice could be heard, raised in a hoarse shout. "For my family!"

Unable to help herself, Alice stepped forward to see what happened. She was just in time to see the dormouse, barely as large as the tip of one of the Jabberwock's claws, jump from the ridge above its orange eye. Her sword was broken into its separate pieces, one in each hand. She drove them to the hilt into the orange orb and used her minuscule weight to drag the blades all the way down to the Jabberwock's scaly cheek.

It was so fast that the Jabberwock didn't even have time to blink before its eye was a torn mess. The shriek it let out was deafening, though not a psychic attack, simply a yowl of pain from a creature unused to its sting. It shook its head like her cat did when you blew in her ear, and Lyla went flying.

Alice was in motion before Lyla had a chance to hit the ground. She had to believe that Lyla had survived. Lyla was indestructible. The Jabberwock was writhing in pain from the damage Lyla had done. This was the best chance she would get to strike. Snicker-snack had never been more alive in her hand than that moment. The blade sang and vibrated in her hand like a hive of disturbed bees on the hunt for blood. Barely cognizant of her own actions, Alice lashed out over and over again, each strike biting into the blue-black hide of the Jabberwock and painting the cave walls with its black blood.

The Jabberwock twisted and bucked, knocking Alice into the cave wall with its bulk before finally finding enough purchase to pull itself free of the cave.

Stars formed in her vision and a searing pain burnt the back of her head, but she would live. The Jabberwock couldn't say the same. With a few more hits to the the thing's neck, she would have taken off its head entirely. The practical part of her brain thought she should scramble back to her hiding place in case the Jabberwock managed to throw flames her way as it died. The emotional side won the argument and pulled her to her knees to look for Lyla.

She called her name over and over again. There was no response. Tears were already pouring down her face when she found the dormouse's crumpled body a few minutes later, along the edge of the cave.

Alice could do nothing but cry and look down at the tiny form of her fallen companion. She tried to be grateful for her sacrifice, but she felt nothing but anger. She had tagged along to jail with her when she didn't have to. Then she had come all the way to the Imagisphere to do battle beside a girl she'd only met a couple of days ago. This was a debt she couldn't ever repay, and she didn't want it. She wanted her friend. How could she walk out of that cave without Lyla?

Finally, when she allowed herself to push away the guilty thoughts and really think about who Lyla was, she remembered her last words: "For my family."

She hadn't sacrificed herself just to save Alice.

She had done what needed to be done in order to complete her task of vengeance, and she'd done it brilliantly. Lyla had died so that Alice had a chance to slay the Jabberwock. That was how she would remember her friend and her death. Not as a sad sacrifice for someone she barely knew, but as a fierce act of determination to avenge her family. Lyla had done something she'd trained for years to accomplish. Alice should be proud.

Comforting as it was, it didn't end Alice's pain. She cried without pause until the card guards filed into the cave to take her back to The Red Palace.

The guards edged toward her with their batons stretched as far as they could reach, their eyes fixed on the vorpal sword laying at her side. They needn't have feared. Her grief had taken the fight out of her for the moment. The guards didn't take any chances though. They wanted her unconscious when they retrieved the sword. The nearest guard to her flashed her a wicked grin and she could have sworn there was a moment where his brown eyes flashed a bright yellow. Just before he pressed his baton gently to her shoulder, his gaze turned down to Lyla and there was a definite sadness to his expression. Then the world left her to darkness and for a blessed moment took her grief with it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"Alice," whispered a soft voice. "It's time. You have to wake up now."

Immediately upon waking, a wave of sorrow washed over her and she wanted nothing more than to retreat to the quiet darkness that unconsciousness brought. There was nothing the waking world offered that she wanted to be a part of. "No. There's no reason to be awake."

"I know it may seem like that. It will get better, in time. Right now though, you have living friends who need you. You can't let them die just because you want to be left alone in your grief."

That brought her around. Her parents had always tried to talk to her about duty and responsibility. They were such abstract concepts before arriving in Wonderland. Now they were real and tangible, and easier to understand. If she didn't get up, her friends would die.

"I'm awake," she said. She rubbed her eyes and sat up. They were just coming to a landing in the palace docks. None of the guards were close to her, not even the seats across from her were occupied. The voice had come from right next to her. That seat was empty, though the cushion did have a strange impression as if a body were there and had recently left. The cushion didn't rebound though.

"Yes, I'm sitting next to you," said the hushed whisper of the Cheshire Cat. "In a moment, I'm going to retrieve the sword from just up there in the middle of that crowd of guards. Do you see the place?"

"I do."

"I will get the sword to you and then you need to beat a hasty retreat to the elevator as we planned. I'll provide the distraction you need." Cheshire's grin flashed for a moment, causing a few guards to glance their way before it disappeared again. They didn't seem inclined to come any closer. "You ready?"

"Ready."

There was nothing to indicate that Cheshire had left except the slowly rising dent in the cushion where he'd been seated. Alice watched intently

and never saw so much as a disturbed hair until the vorpal sword lifted into the air and the tip could be seen over the heads of the guards. They all had their backs turned, so they hadn't yet taken notice.

The loading ramp of the ship opened to allow the horde of soldiers to exit. One of them glanced behind him and saw the floating sword. He let out a startled yelp and then fell back into his comrades, holding his bleeding throat. The rest of the guards not involved in the collision turned in unison and found themselves facing a levitating sword. They were already holding their clubs, though some of them lowered them rather than raising them in defense. Pandemonium ensued as each individual guard decided what the best course of action should be. Some tried to help their fallen comrade, who was obviously beyond the help of even a medical professional. Others edged cautiously toward the floating sword, which had started lashing out randomly at them. None of them were hit. Whether that was by Cheshire's design, or caused by the sword's opposition to being wielded by someone other than Alice, was impossible to tell. Either way, most of the guards wanted nothing to do with it. They had no target to take down and they'd seen the gruesome work the blade could do. They turned and fled, in some cases trampling their less fortunate brethren.

Appropriately satisfied with the chaos, the sword floated over to Alice and landed in her hands. At least, that's how it appeared to the onlookers. A few of the bravest soldiers lunged toward Alice, drawing their own swords as they came, the queen's orders to use their clubs forgotten.

Alice let fall a final tear for Lyla and then concentrated on the job of saving her remaining friends from the executioner's axe. A lunge skewered two approaching guards in one stab. They collapsed, and she withdrew, flicking her blade across the legs of the guard closest to them. The few brave others began to circle, looking for an opening that wouldn't get them gutted.

A fierce yowl followed by a hiss turned two of their heads toward the loading ramp and cost them their lives. Alice cut through their chests with a vicious slash. Their blood sprayed across the guards on either side of them. The feline yowls turned to more human screams as Cheshire blinked in and out of visibility, delivering debilitating or lethal wounds as he went.

The combination of Alice wielding Snicker-snack and a lethal cat that could disappear at will proved too much for the queen's new recruits and

they fled the ship in an undignified rush while Cheshire dogged them from behind, pushing them farther into the docks and away from the elevator.

Alice took that as her cue and bolted for the opening silver doors. A pair of guards stood inside, swords in hand. They bore an eight and a nine on their chests. It seemed as though it no longer mattered that she be taken alive.

Just as well, she didn't intend to show them any mercy either. She studied their stances as she ran full tilt toward them, consulting with Snicker-snack the whole way. The tips of their swords were angled at chest height ready to strike at her torso. She closed the gap to a few meters without slowing her sprint. It was close enough to see their confusion. They had expected her to slow and engage them in a proper fight. She didn't have time for any such thing. After a couple more steps she leaned back and dropped into a slide on the polished concrete floor, gliding right under their guards. Unlike in the movie she'd seen, she didn't slide right past them and into the elevator. She did get close enough to slash their legs out from under them and leave them convulsing on the concrete.

Alice stood and pressed the up button. She stepped onto the empty elevator when the doors opened and selected the fortieth floor, the jail floor.

Alice crouched just before the doors opened. A forest of swords pierced the air above her. She dove forward, leading with her sword, her head down and her shoulder forward. Her weight wasn't enough to force the guards aside, but once they realized they'd already lost control of the situation they parted quickly enough.

Her attack wasn't at all poised or controlled. It amounted to little more than flailing her sword arm in as wide an arc as she could while keeping herself as small a target as possible, but most of the guards were seriously injured. One of the falling men caught her shoulder with a glancing blow, opening her skin with what felt like a blade made entirely of fire. It was very different from the electric pain of the clubs. Those brought a strange prickling sort of agony that erased thought. The sword wound, after the initial shock, was clarifying. It woke her mind from the haze of complacency that wielding such a strong weapon had instilled.

Her next few attacks, while less agile due to her favoring her wounded shoulder, were much less spastic. She had no desire to taste more cold steel. The uninjured soldiers slashed at her and were repelled by Snicker-snack, brushing them just to her sides. She didn't cut through their blades. Instead

she used the glancing blows from them to knock the guards off balance and quickly pierce a vital organ before darting back into a guarded stance, her body turned as much to the side as she could in order to present the smallest area of attack.

The last two guards standing tried to take her from either side and attacked at the same time. Rather than engaging them directly, she spun out of their way and then cut them down as they tried to avoid injuring one another with their wild lunges. They dropped to the ground amidst their dying companions. They'd each lost an arm. Snicker-snack urged her to finish them and she complied, piercing their hearts. She had to bring her friends back to the elevator and she couldn't risk them brandishing their swords again. No one else in her group would die today; she swore it.

"Bloody hell," said a grizzled man in the cell closest to the elevator. His plastic cell had given him a front row seat to the skirmish. "You're an absolute menace." His tone was one of utter astonishment mixed with respect.

Alice looked down to the gore at her feet and shuddered. It was hard to believe she was capable of such horrific violence. She was a different person than the one who arrived in Wonderland. That didn't mean this wouldn't haunt her nightmares.

Quickly, she found the control panel and located the buttons that would open Dee and Dum's cells. They were in the hall and trundling down to meet her seconds later. They barely spared a glance for the guards piled around the elevator.

"You're hurt," said Dee. He gently pulled away the flap of her shirt covering the gash. "Just a flesh wound. It's already almost stopped bleeding. I'm just going to put some pressure on it."

Alice winced at the pain of Dee's touch, surprisingly gentle as it was.
"What are Seamus and March's cell numbers?"

Dum walked over and checked. "Two fifteen and sixteen."

Alice pressed the corresponding buttons and soon they were joined by her two other friends.

"It would appear you really do delight in cutting off appendages," said Seamus, a wild light in his dazzling amber eyes. He stared down at the carnage in front of the elevator. "Quite the master at it too."

March tittered and covered his mouth with his hand.

Alice groaned and shook her head. "No time to argue. I'm sure more guards will be pouring in here pretty soon."

Alice looked down row upon row of clear cells from her vantage point in the control room. There was no telling why all of them had been imprisoned or whether they were truly a danger to society. Given the queen's penchant for locking up innocent people like her and all of her friends, there was little choice to be made. "Arm yourselves, everyone. I'm sure those guards won't mind."

Dee had somehow already picked up a pair of swords without letting pressure off her wound. Dum found a sword and a shield, March picked up one of the dreaded clubs, and Seamus picked up both a club and a sword. He pushed the button that powered the club and then pressed his tongue gently to the smooth metal. He jerked back, shaking his head wildly. His hair stuck out in a wild puff where it wasn't covered by his hat. "Now that's the stuff," he said, and turned a beaming smile to Alice. "How is a weed like an overdressed lion?"

"I haven't a clue," said Alice, noting that the madness seemed to have retreated from his eyes. "How?"

"I was hoping you could tell me," he said. "I think that jolt may have knocked the answer right out of my head along with the madness." He turned his gaze down to the hare. "Care for a taste?"

"I think not," said March. "I don't want my fur looking like that mess on your head."

The hatter frowned and looked at his somewhat distorted reflection in the metal doors of the elevator. "Oh, I find it quite fetching, actually."

"All right everyone, get ready to get on the elevator," said Alice. She poised her hand over the button that was labeled emergency release. "I'm opening all the cells and we need to be on the first trip out of here if we're to make our escape."

"I'm not so sure that's a wise decision," said Dum, nodding over toward a man who was painting crude pictures on the clear wall of his cell in his own blood.

"It's the only humane thing to do. We can't play judge and jury to these people the way the queen has. They all deserve another chance."

Dum didn't look convinced.

"Well, at the very least, they'll provide an excellent distraction for the guards," said Dee.

"That they will," agreed Dum. He smiled at his brother, obviously proud of his astute observation. "Carry on then."

Alice shook her head at the brothers and mashed the release button. She was greeted by the hiss of dozens of doors opening and shouts from the prisoners inside the cells.

Alice shrugged Dee off her shoulder and winced. The odd little group piled into the elevator and she tapped the button to return to the dock floor. The elevator closed on a crowd of jubilant prisoners rushing toward them. She silently wished them the best and hoped the few weapons left on the dead guards served them well.

"I'll lead the way to The White Rabbit when we get down there. Stay with me and call out if you're in trouble. I don't want to lose another one of you."

"We saw what happened, Alice," said Seamus. "It's not your fault."

Alice reached up with her free hand and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Not now, Seamus. We can talk about it when we're safely away from here."

"As you will, m'lady."

The elevator doors opened to pure chaos. Guards ran around stabbing at empty air. Others were backed against the walls and shouting at the same. Some fought each other, howling about yellow eyes. Clearly Cheshire had been hard at work while they were away.

A few guards took notice of their arrival and ran toward them with swords raised. Dee and Dum dispatched them without any help from Alice, who stepped back into the lead and charged toward the dock that held Rabbit. Somewhere along the way a feline grin joined their group. It turned toward Alice as they ran and above it a pair of vertically slitted yellow eyes appeared. "Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all, Cheshire," panted Alice. "Not that we could stop you anyway."

"Just because I can go where I please doesn't mean that I should be rude," he sniffed. He didn't seem to be out of breath at all.

"Well, either way, it would be our pleasure."

"Thank you," said the empty air.

A few seconds later, a guard fell out from behind a ship just in front of them, his throat slashed by obvious claw marks.

"I sure am glad that guy is on our side," said Dee.

"I think you speak for us all," said March. "He trips all of my predator senses and has me ready to bolt for the nearest hole in the ground."

Alice led them through the unoccupied guard station at the cordoned off area of ships. They were only a few rows down when The White Rabbit appeared before them, nowhere near where he was supposed to be. He was conveniently right next to the nearest exit with his doors open.

"All aboard," he called, and Alice was certain that all of her companions could hear him by the way their heads tilted.

"You heard the ship. Let's go!" called Alice, waving them aboard. "I take it we have Cheshire to thank for your being ready and waiting," she said to Rabbit.

"Yes, quite the persuasive fellow, that one," said Rabbit.

"I've no doubt."

"And he was kind enough to remove that pesky tracking device, so I'm truly free," said Rabbit, as close to elation as she'd ever heard him.

Alice wasn't sure if it was kindness that had prompted Cheshire to remove the tracker. It was more likely pragmatism, but she didn't want to ruin Rabbit's mood. "That's wonderful."

"Yes, and my first act as a free person is to hang around here risking my neck so I can rescue you lot," he said with a sniff. The old Rabbit was back, though she thought she detected a hint of a smile in his tone.

"That's quite charitable of you," said Alice.

"I know," said Rabbit.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The ride from Wonderland to open space was a bit bumpy to say the least. Somehow a couple of ships made it out of the docks, despite the mayhem Cheshire had caused. The White Rabbit proved his worth time and time again as he dodged the queens anti-aircraft guns, and their pursuers.

“Hold on, everybody,” said the ship, and then veered wildly to the left. “I don’t have any weapons, so I’m going to have to get creative.”

There wasn’t much need to hold on with the seats the ship had decked itself out with. Each person had a chair that was just the right size for them and fitted with a five point harness. The ship would have had to fall to pieces before any of them would have budged a centimeter.

Rabbit’s front and side windows gave Alice a good view of the artillery exploding around them. At one point he turned completely around and was headed back toward the planet’s surface. “We’re going to crash,” called Alice, gripping her restraint harness tightly.

“Hardly,” retorted The White Rabbit.

The ship zipped and zagged more times than could be counted before a ship loomed large in the front window. It disappeared a half a second later to be replaced with open sky. An explosion shook the ship so hard that Alice’s vision went dark. “Are you all right, Rabbit?” asked Alice.

“Never better. I can’t say the same for the two ships that were following us though. They seem to have had a rather unfortunate collision.” A rumbling sort of chortle echoed through the ship.

“I think I’m going to like this Rabbit,” said March. “He’s sure got some hare legs on him.” He thumped his foot on the floor with a resounding thunk to emphasize his point.

“I’ll thank you very kindly to not thump my deck again, Sir Hare,” said The White Rabbit.

“My apologies, it will take some time to get used to being inside a living creature,” said March.

“It took a couple of decades for me to get used to having living creatures inside of me,” said The White Rabbit. His statement came with a mental shudder. “So, where are we off to?”

“Nedra,” said Seamus before Alice could say anything.

“My apologies, sir, but I was asking Alice.”

Alice went about making introductions to put the topic of their destination aside for the moment. “White Rabbit, I’d like you to meet March, the hare, Seamus, sometimes called the Mad Hatter, and the brothers, Dee and Dum. Loyal friends of mine, each and every one of them.”

“And none of us equal to the lady who couldn’t be here with us,” said Seamus. He took off his hat, exposing even more of his puffy hair, and placed it over his heart. “May she rest in peace.”

“I’m saddened to say that I wasn’t able to retrieve her body so that we could give her a proper burial,” said Alice. Tears flowed freely from her eyes.

“But I was,” said Cheshire. He appeared next to a table that Alice could have sworn wasn’t there just a moment before. In his hand was a white handkerchief with a small lump inside just big enough to be the dormouse.

“Oh, Cheshire,” cried Alice. She clicked out of the harness and threw her arms around his neck. “You certainly are strange and wonderful. We never could have done this without you.”

“High praise from such a strange and wonderful girl,” said Cheshire. “Lyla died valiantly. The least I could do was take her off of that nowhere moon and allow her to be laid to rest in real soil. On Nedra.”

Alice pulled back from the embrace and scowled at Cheshire through her tears. “Not you, too.”

“Yes, I’m afraid I have to be in the majority on this one, as much as I despise it.”

“In the majority?” asked Alice. She turned and found Dee and Dum nodding their agreement.

“I’m the captain, I make the decisions,” said Alice petulantly.

“Aye, that you do, Alice,” agreed Seamus. “We just wanted to make our choice clear so our captain had all the information necessary to make an informed decision.”

Alice thought it through. She’d learned a lot on Wonderland, but she still had unfinished business at home. “Nedra is a good place to lay Lyla to rest,”

agreed Alice, not ready to concede anything more than that. “Set a course for Nedra, please, Rabbit.”

“Very well, Captain,” said The White Rabbit.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The journey back to Nedra felt much shorter than the trip to Wonderland had been. It was a solemn trip, each of the companions lost in their own thoughts. They all spent a good portion of their time looking at the small white bundle sitting on the table and sighing sadly.

The hatter began to gibber to himself when they went into orbit around Nedra and licked the charged baton again. His hair was wilder than ever, but he calmed down. March, for his part, was mostly quiet in his madness, only occasionally flinching away from something that wasn't there.

"Shall I land where it was we met, Alice?" asked The White Rabbit.

"It seems as good a place as any," she said grudgingly.

They landed in the clearing a few moments later. It was night again, with a bright moon lighting their way. The field seemed such a foreign place after her grand adventure on Wonderland. So ordinary. It felt strange to be in a place that wasn't perpetually lit by a neon glow with danger lurking around every corner. At least the tall trees surrounding them were somewhat foreboding. Or maybe it was just that her house and her parents were just beyond them.

"What a difference a few days makes," Alice muttered to herself.

"I'm quite sure your parents feel the same way," said Seamus. He stepped up behind her and placed his hands gently on her shoulders. Before she could argue, he continued, "I can't imagine why you'd trade all this lovely greenery for the asphalt and concrete of Wonderland."

"I didn't trade all of this for Wonderland. I didn't even know that I was going to end up in Wonderland when I hopped on board The White Rabbit. I traded all of this boring sameness for the possibility of adventure. And that's what I found. It wasn't always great, and it wasn't always fun, but it was exciting and I made lots of new friends."

"That sounds like a perfect description of any life lived without fear," said Seamus.

Alice crossed her arms and scowled up at Seamus and his brilliant amber eyes. “No, it’s not. My life could never be like that here.”

“Why not?”

“Because my parents—”

“Would try to keep you safe?”

“Exactly,” said Alice, feeling distinctly like she was being led into a trap.

“Of course they will, but didn’t Dee, Dum, Lyla, and the rest of us try to do the same thing?”

“Well, yes,” admitted Alice.

“And yet you still had adventures.”

“Because none of you tried to stop me. You just gave me advice.”

Seamus nodded and then gave her a mischievous grin. “Just try to think of your parents’ punishments as advice on how to live your life.”

“But advice doesn’t have to be taken. Their punishments do,” groused Alice.

“Yes, but it’s up to you what lesson you learn from their ‘advice’,” said Seamus. He sighed and turned slowly away. “I can’t keep you from coming with us and I won’t try. I just have one of my special feelings that you should stay here and ripen a bit further before you take on the queen.”

Alice took his arm and turned him gently back toward her. “You really think that some day I’ll defeat the queen and free Wonderland like in your vision?” asked Alice.

“I do.”

“And you think that staying here on Nedra is the best way to achieve that?”

“For the time being, I do.”

“Very well then,” said Alice. “I shall take your advice and stay here on Nedra. That doesn’t mean I’m going to take all of my parents’ advice though.”

“Nor should you,” agreed Seamus. “Now that that’s settled, let’s go say goodbye to our friend Lyla.”

They walked back over to the gathering of their friends who had dug a small hole in the earth in the center of a ring of mushrooms. Her mother had told her once that a ring like that was called a fairy ring. They were a good omen that meant fairies had blessed the ground by dancing in a circle there. It was a perfect place to bury a beloved friend.

Dee and Dum sang a sweet, sad song for Lyla in beautiful harmony that would have seemed strange coming from such big brutes had she not gotten to know their gentle hearts. March recited a poem that made little sense because half of the words were made up, but even still, it told the truth; that Lyla was an amazing hero who had slain the vicious Jabberwock.

Alice tried to speak, but was too overcome to say much more than, “We miss you already.”

Seamus closed the funeral with a sweet speech about Lyla and her devotion to her family. Alice had assumed when Lyla talked about her family that she had been married and had children; that they were the ones lost to the Jabberwock. Instead, she had been the oldest child in her family, though not yet grown, when the Jabberwock had taken them. It was her brothers, sisters, and parents who had been taken from her. She’d grown up alone and fighting for her life. It had taken her years to learn to fight as fiercely as she had, but she’d done it all with the conviction that she would avenge them, and she had. In the end though, he said that the family she had died for were the people standing around her grave, her friends.

It brought Alice to tears again, which she found very unbecoming of someone who wanted to be a pirate. Then again, maybe she didn’t want to be a pirate. They tended to kill and plunder for selfish reasons. She had found she didn’t have the stomach for that. Perhaps there was something in the world for her to do that would give her a sense of pride and accomplishment, rather than make her feel like a selfish child. Something she could tell someone as noble as Lyla about with a glint of pride.

Dee settled the small bundle of Lyla’s body into the hole and pushed the dirt in to fill it. She was so small that it took almost no time at all. “Strange how someone so small could change so many lives so drastically,” said Alice.

“It is indeed,” agreed Seamus with a knowing grin.

“Where will you go?” asked Alice.

“Oh, here and there,” said Seamus.

“If I don’t know where you’re going, how will I find you again?”

“I suspect you’ll find us in the last place you think to look,” said Seamus sagely.

Alice found herself nodding at the cryptic advice for several moments before she saw the ridiculousness of the statement. When it dawned on her, it must have been easy to read on her face, because the hatter howled with

laughter. It was a contagious, mad laugh that soon spread to their entire party. It was just the thing to lighten the mood of a funeral, and soften the ache of saying goodbye.

Each of her friends hugged her and wished her well, even The White Rabbit, whose tendrils somehow managed to feel comforting instead of like being squeezed by a hundred tiny snakes. “You take care of them,” said Alice.

“As long as they don’t get it in their heads to order me about like an inanimate object, I promise not to jettison them into space,” said Rabbit.

Alice giggled. “Close enough.”

“The hatter says we’ll meet again.”

“Yes.”

“Not soon enough,” said The White Rabbit.

Alice smiled and nodded. She patted his tendrils and walked away before she started to cry again.

Dee and Dum simply gave her massive, bone-crushing hugs and stalked off to pretend they were busy getting the ship ready to leave.

March hugged her leg and reminded her that tea time was the only time worth keeping track of. It seemed like sound advice for passing the time between seeing friends without going completely mad, so she took it to heart.

Her hug with Seamus was longest of all, and he was the one to break it. “I want you to take Snicker-snack with you,” said Alice. He tried to object and she placed a finger over his dark lips. “She’s a great weapon, but the longer I hold her, the more everyone starts to look like an enemy. If there’s one thing you all have taught me, it’s that I’m going to need friends if I’m to survive. I’ll never make friends if all I’m prepared to do is fight.”

Seamus nodded and took the sword and her scabbard from her outstretched hands. “You have grown very wise, Alice.”

“I’m sure I just read that in a book somewhere,” said Alice, doing her best to imitate his grin. “I really just want you to take her because Mother and Father would never let me keep her.”

Seamus grinned back. “Until we meet again,” he said, and stepped aboard The White Rabbit.

Cheshire had disappeared at about the time of the funeral, but appeared long enough for her to see who she was hugging. He disappeared with a

final flash of mischievous yellow eyes and a whispered, “I’ll be seeing you.”

A few moments later, The White Rabbit took off and disappeared into the night sky. Alice waved until she couldn’t tell his white form from the stars in the sky, then turned and began the dreaded march back to her house.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The walk back wasn't long, but it was crowded with thoughts. There wasn't any way that her parents would believe any of the truth, and yet, the idea of lying about her adventure didn't appeal to her in the least. It would be better for her relationship with them if she lied and told them she'd fallen down a well or something. That wasn't a thought that would have occurred to her just a few short days ago. Her parents had instilled in her a steadfast belief that telling them the truth was the only good option. Now, she realized that sometimes the truth was far more complicated.

Her decision as to what to tell her parents seemed to change between each footfall on soft grass. Finally, she decided not to decide at all until she met with her parents and read their mood. She filled the rest of the walk with a mental debate about what kind of punishment she would receive if she told the truth. They would probably send her to some sort of boarding school, maybe even a military academy if they were particularly cross with her. Strangely, the thought of punishment didn't affect her the way it had before her trip to Wonderland. Nothing they could do to her would ever be equal to the battles she had fought there. As the Mad Hatter had said, the punishments were simply advice to be taken or ignored.

She stepped onto the manicured expanse of her yard and realized there was still one more decision to make. Should she climb back in her window and wait for morning to deal with her parents, or should she go around to the front door and deal with them immediately?

One look at her disgusting clothes made the decision clear. There was no way she wanted to sleep another night in those blood-caked rags, and putting on other clothes would just ruin them unless she showered. Also, if she went to sleep, there was the possibility that the trip to Wonderland would fade away like the dream she swore it was for so long. The front door it was.

If she were a little more honest with herself, she just wanted to see her parents. To hug and kiss them and revel in their safety. She'd missed them.

Would they feel as unfamiliar as Nedran soil did to her now, or would it finally feel like coming home?

The large red door had looked ominous for as long as she could remember, with its large metal knocker shaped like some sort of goblin or gargoyle with a ring in its mouth. Now, it was just a door and a harmless chunk of metal. The true beasts on Nedra were the Colarians and they only attacked the cities with their ugly gray ships. There was nothing in her house to be truly afraid of.

Alice reached up, grasped the metal ring, and brought it down with a heavy clack three times. Lights flashed on and almost instantly were followed by the sound of running footsteps. It had to be well after midnight. Her parents should have been sleeping like the dead.

When her father flung open the door, it was obvious that he hadn't slept properly in days. His hair was a mess and there were dark circles under his eyes. Mother came up behind him and then was pushing him out of the way in her rush to wrap her arms around Alice. It took her father several moments to wipe enough sleep from his eyes to realize what was going on and then he joined the hug. Dinah joined in at a lazier pace, rubbing her head against all of their legs as if she didn't know what all the fuss was about, but wanted to be a part of it. She didn't fool Alice one bit. If she was able, she would be giving her a Cheshire grin.

"What in the world happened to you?" asked her mother through her tears.

It was the moment she'd been preparing for. Time to decide on the truth or a lie. When she thought back on the last few days, on bravery, nobility, and the lengths great souls had gone to for the people they truly cared about, there was only one answer she could give. "I've had the most unbelievable adventure."

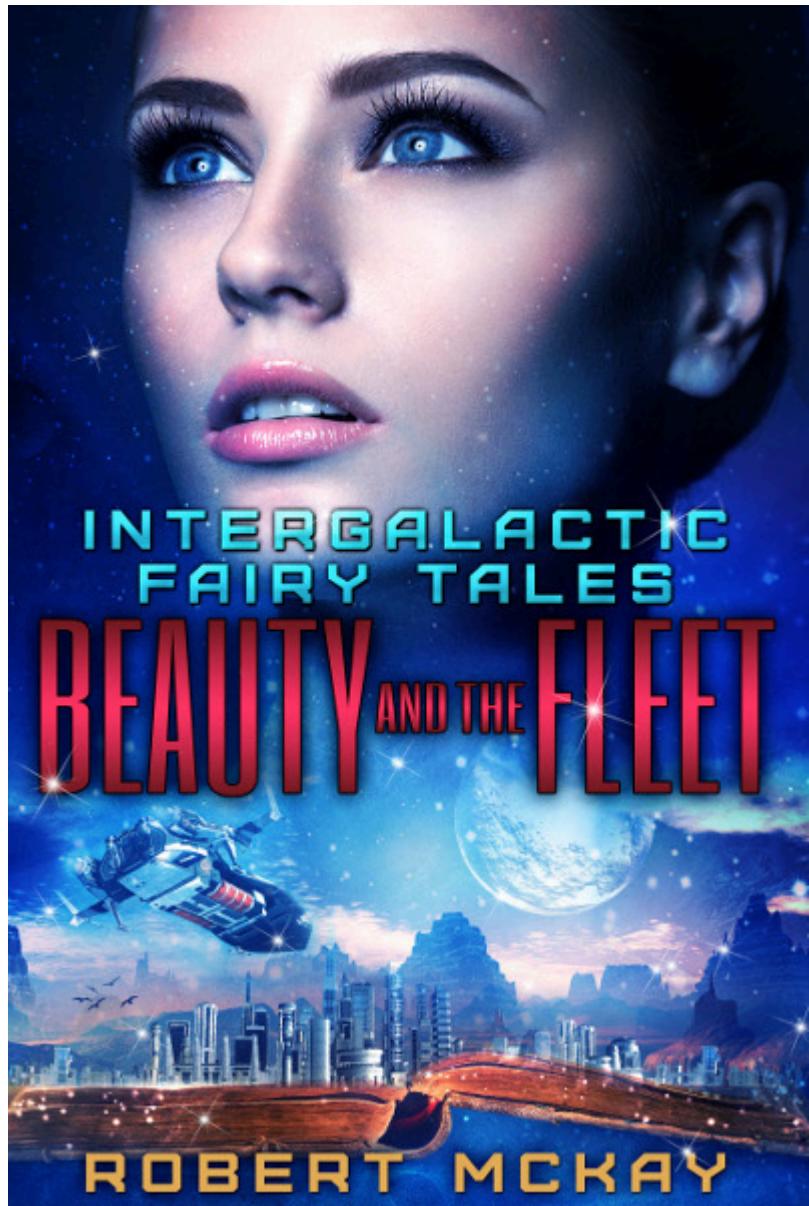
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About the Author

Robert McKay is a clever nerd, who feels uncomfortable being called such. He believes in the oxford comma, puns, and true love. Stories that wrap all of these things together, along with some outer space adventure, make his heart go pitter-patter and his days a whole lot brighter. When he's not writing, he's probably reading, but if he's not doing either of those things, he may be found bowling, playing tabletop games, or researching how much it costs to rent a space shuttle.

You can find out more about Robert and his books at
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